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A matter of belonging

Israeli cancer app empowers the patient
By Ma'ayan Gutbezahl

WHEN TWO Israeli entrepreneur friends met for dinner in 2015, the conversation eventually turned to a shared personal circumstance: Both had recently lost a loved one to cancer.

“When we started talking about our experiences, there was a common thread in our stories,” says Eliran Malki, cofounder and CEO of Belong. “We both made mistakes while helping them with their treatment and thought, ‘If only I had known then what I know now.’ There is no reason for every patient to go through this fight all alone and learn from his experience only. The experience and knowledge of many can help, improve and streamline the process, and, in some cases, even impact the result.”

Instead of dwelling on the past, Malki and

Irad Deutsch decided to use the difficult lessons that their personal losses had taught them to build something that would help millions of others affected by cancer.

Harnessing their entrepreneurial spirit, the two utilized their technical know-how from previous successful business endeavors.

Malki is a successful serial entrepreneur who co-founded Veracity Ltd. and More IT Resources Ltd. He also has several exits under his belt in the field of high-performance computing and big data.

Deutsch, the CTO of Belong, is one of the world’s leading technological experts in the areas of databases, big data and analytics. He worked with Malki on several previous exits.

Together, the duo have created a mobile app-driven community that provides cancer patients and their caregivers with access to almost everything people fighting cancer need in one place: information, guidance and insight provided by top notch physicians, oncology division directors, research managers, specialists, researchers and nurses with international credentials, a worldwide

clinical trial search, and an amazing social network that provides crowdsourced help with preparing for the journey ahead and avoiding costly mistakes.

Two years later, with the help of dozens of the world’s top oncologists, almost 100,000 cancer patients and rapid expansion, Belong has become the world’s largest cancer-focused social network.

Empowering the patient

According to the World Health Organization, cancer killed 8.8 million people in 2015 alone. For the newly diagnosed, the scope of information and knowledge needed to make informed treatment decisions can be overwhelming, and it is not uncommon for cancer to be misdiagnosed as another disease or as the wrong type of cancer.

When it comes to misdiagnosis, one member of Belong, who prefers to remain anonymous, is all too familiar. A breast cancer survivor, she was initially misdiagnosed, had a mastectomy, and battled serious depression during her treatment.

“I looked everywhere for answers to my

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Varda Shalev

questions. How do I deal with this? What do I do?” Malki recalls her saying in a recent interview.

Turning to more traditional social networking avenues such as Facebook and local support groups failed to provide her with the information and emotional support she sought. When she discovered *Belong*, she found a place where she could interact with other women in the same situation.

Now a vocal breast cancer advocate, she uses *Belong* and the lessons from her experiences to help tens of thousands of women battling breast cancer.

“I feel like I have some more power back in my hands,” she says. “I can help other women who need someone who has been there, and I know exactly what it’s like to face this terrible disease.”

“*Belong* is all about empowering the patient. The patients have a high level of stress and are navigating many unknowns. They are the only ones who can devote 100% of their time to improving their treatment.” “We built tools to help them on their journeys, and we are refining them continuously. Just like driving in a new area is helped tremendously by using GPS, our *Belongers* (users of the *Belong* app) are on an unfamiliar journey and they are in the driver’s seat. *Belong*’s vision is to be a GPS for improved treatment and a smoother journey.

“*Belongers* are treated for all cancers, from the rarest types to the most common. The community fills a vital role for cancer patients, providing an all-inclusive resource for information and access to clinical trials,” he continues. “Especially for rare cancers, it is often difficult for patients to find information and other individuals like themselves to connect with. The percentage of *Belongers*

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Irad Deutsch and Eliran Malki

in rare cancer sub-communities is higher than those of cancers’ global patient populations.”

A ‘360-degree cancer buster’

Belong approaches the cancer journey from multiple perspectives: medical, clinical and, of course, social. The medical side of the app provides free access to top medical professionals from hospitals across the world, including New York-based Mount Sinai and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston.

The social side of the free app is its robust message board platform, where *Belongers* speak openly – and anonymously – about matters of concern while they navigate their disease and treatment. There are hundreds of message boards in the app, with topics ranging from every specific type of cancer imaginable, to frank discussions about sexual intimacy during and after treatment. Nutrition, exercise, and tips for coping with side effects are also key areas of discussion.

Prof. Varda Shalev, director of the Institute of Research and Innovation Maccabitech (big data and epidemiology research), and an active primary care physician in Maccabi Health Care Services, says that she sees the amazing impact and appeal *Belong* has for its users, on quality of life, survival and more, and that the platform fills in gaps traditional approaches to cancer treatment have struggled to fill.

“The amount of time that doctors give to each of their patients, and what patients choose to share with their physicians, is limited,” Shalev says. “Many patients are willing to write openly and honestly on a platform that gives them the option of anonymity and contact with others who are fighting the same battles. That social aspect is filling a crucial

role when it comes to patients and physicians obtaining a more complete picture of the diagnosis and treatment process.”

When a space is provided for patients to speak candidly about their experience, the entire chain of people involved in the treatment process can be affected, she explains.

“Simply being able to speak without fear of judgment can galvanize patients to be more open with their primary doctors and caregivers. When people see that their problems and concerns are commonly experienced by others with cancer, they feel emboldened to open up and bring those issues to their doctors. This, in turn, gives doctors a clearer picture of how to implement affective treatment.”

Looking to the future

Belong is in use worldwide and is multilingual. Physicians who donate their time to *Belong* come from across the globe.

Recently, *Belong* partnered with the American Cancer Society (ACS) and Colorectal Cancer Canada. Since partnering with ACS, their closed member forum on the app has generated over one million interactions and is projected to generate over eight million by the 12-month mark of the partnership.

The creators of *Belong* are also working toward partnerships with additional advocacy groups in their mission to elevate cancer awareness and emphasize patient engagement. As more partnerships are put in place, they believe *Belong* will be able to reach an even wider cancer community.

As it continues on its rapid growth path, it’s clear that *Belong* fills an important need for both patients and their families, helping to support the cancer journey and improve quality of life. You can download the app at www.belong.life ■