

# News Release

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UNIVERSITY of  
DENVER

CENTER FOR ONCOLOGY  
PSYCHOLOGY EXCELLENCE

## University of Denver Announces New Center for Oncology Psychology Excellence

*First-of-its-kind program will train clinical psychology students to address social, emotional impact of cancer on patients and caregivers*

February 11, 2016 – DENVER – “My world came crashing down when I received the dreaded phone call on February 11, 2015, informing me I had been diagnosed with Stage III infiltrating ductile carcinoma, the most common form of breast cancer.”

After her diagnosis, Diane Simard, Senior Vice President of Bye Aerospace, panicked, grieved, got angry and quickly accepted the challenge. “I actually had to Google ‘breast cancer,’” Simard said. “I knew nothing about it and 115 million responses came back; it was beyond overwhelming. I couldn’t think, I didn’t know who to talk to, I didn’t want to tell people.”

“When I asked my oncologist whether she could refer me to a counselor who has experience working with a female executive cancer patient like me, she said mental health professionals, including licensed psychologists, typically don’t specialize in an area like cancer. I couldn’t believe it,” Simard said. “But I was too sick to care.”

Five months and 16 brutal rounds of chemotherapy later, Simard survived treatment and emerged with a sense of gratitude, committed to “positively channeling” her experience by finding out why so little emphasis is placed on the psychological aspect of cancer—and what she could do to change that.

This week Simard and the University of Denver (DU) announced plans for the

Center for Oncology Psychology Excellence (COPE). Simard designed the program in partnership with DU's Graduate School of Professional Psychology (GSPP). "After a series of exploratory meetings, we realized that no psychology programs exist in the U.S. that focus on clinical training in psychosocial oncology at the graduate level. COPE will be the resource that allows those who receive this diagnosis to immediately begin a conversation."

The goal of COPE is to increase access to psychological and social services for cancer patients and their caregivers. "COPE will offer a comprehensive approach to learning through coursework, field placements, community partnerships, and research to train our students to best serve cancer patients and their loved ones. It is an incredible opportunity for students to specialize in this area and for us to meet the needs of the community," said COPE's Director and GSPP faculty member, Dr. Nicole Taylor.

Taylor's passion for oncology psychology stems from an undergraduate research project that involved interviewing cancer patients. "One woman who was a very devoted homemaker said, 'Before I had cancer, I was a freshly pressed set of linen sheets. Do you see that pile of sheets crumpled up in the corner of my hospital room? That's how I feel now.'" It was a career-defining moment for Taylor as she witnessed the critical need for emotional support among cancer patients.

"This program fits our training model beautifully," said GSPP Dean Shelly Smith-Acuna. "Our students receive experiential training with local agencies while completing their coursework, which means they're already contributing to the community by seeing clients, but we're also developing a workforce of highly trained professionals that are going to be our future practitioners and scholars."

GSPP student Hannah Katz will be among the first to enroll in the new specialty. "My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer eight years ago. As she finished treatment I learned how little support existed for survivors of cancer. When treatment was over and life went back to 'normal,' the support was gone. I knew working with cancer patients and their caregivers, particularly during the survivorship stage, was something I wanted to be a part of."

"GSPP doesn't leave anybody out. They listen to the needs of the community and create programs in response to those needs," said Jeannie Ritter of the Mental Health Center of Denver. "Students and faculty are embedded in the community and when they recognize a need, ask, 'How do we step up to meet that need?'"

Provost Gregg Kvistad said, “We want the community to see the University of Denver as a place where problems will be addressed, and if we’re fortunate, perhaps solved. I can’t imagine a more fitting program to launch right now at DU.”

Simard recently finished her own treatment plan and asked her oncologist, “Am I cured? Am I in remission? What am I?” Her doctor said, “You became a cancer survivor on the day you were diagnosed.” At 10:45 this morning, Simard became a one-year cancer survivor.

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*Founded in 1864, the University of Denver is committed to engaging with students in advancing scholarly inquiry, cultivating critical and creative thought, and generating knowledge. The University strives to educate the 21<sup>st</sup>-century citizens and leaders needed in its organizations and communities. The University of Denver ranks among the country's top 100 national universities, and the Institute of International Education ranks it No. 1 among national doctoral and research institutions in the percentage of undergraduate students participating in study abroad programs. For additional information, visit the University's Media Relations [website](#), or follow the University on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).*