

A War Chest Against Breast Cancer

By Lyn Dobrin • Photo by Ann Parry

\$3 million and countless good deeds later, the **Manhasset Women's Coalition** Against Breast Cancer fights on



When I start my own country, I'm going to ask the Manhasset Women's Coalition Against Breast Cancer (and their Junior Coalition) to run it. Since it began in 1997, this amazing, all-volunteer community group has raised nearly three million dollars, distributing it to fund innovative research, increase awareness through education, and provide support services to those with breast cancer and related diseases.

The Coalition was formed when women from the Munsey Park Women's Club approached other women's clubs in Manhasset, seeking to join forces to do something significant in the battle against breast cancer. Dorothy Forte, one of the founders, says she made it her job to make sure the organization was off to a proper start as a separate not-for-profit, writing bi-laws and mission statements, as well as planning fundraisers.

She says that the first few dinners, which they call Ladies Night Out, didn't even have a journal. But they learned, and the 17th annual event in October of 2013, held at Leonard's in Great Neck, brought out 500 women, all ready to open their purses to support the work of the organization.

Funding research was the original focus of the group.

"We gave to programs that were looking into areas that affected our constituents," says Forte.

Board of Directors of the Manhasset Women's Coalition Against Breast Cancer, at the home of President Marybeth Accurso (left to right, front row): Lynn Minutillo (Director), Barbara Buckley (V.P. - Research), Laura M. Dilimetin (General Counsel), Marybeth Accurso (President), Laura Hull (V.P. - Junior Coalition), Dorothy Forte (V.P. - Outreach); (back row): Susan Sabiston (Secretary), Linda Kane (Director), Jen DeSena (Director), Joy Sargent (Director), Peggy Gajdjis (Treasurer) and Deborah Colalillo (Director).

So, when they saw that there seemed to be an increase in metastatic breast cancer, the research committee chose a project at the Research Foundation at Stony Brook University that was investigating metastatic breast cancer stem cells. Other recipients of research grants include North Shore-LIJ Health System, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, NYU Langone Medical Center, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and Weill Cornell Medical College.

The Manhasset Coalition is a dynamic organization, and one of the reasons for their continued success appears to be their responsiveness to needs in the community. In 2003, the Junior Coalition was founded, a program for teenage girls in the ninth to 12th grades. Forte said they wanted this to be a meaningful experience for the young women, "not just something they would put on their resumes." Members of the Junior Coalition are educated about breast cancer, and the girls are expected to do their own fundraising and community service.

Laura Hull, a Manhasset resident for 23 years, had been toying with the idea of joining the Coalition when they contacted her. Her daughter was entering the ninth grade, and they were asking her to become

a Junior Coalition advisor. Hull took on the job with two other women, with the commitment that they would see the group through their four years of high school.

Educating the young women about breast cancer is the first step. A social worker from the Adelphi NY Statewide Breast Cancer Program attends the first meeting, providing information about the disease and discussion of healthy choices. The young women then move into community service. Last year, 30 platters of holiday cookies, baked by the girls, were prepared for families dealing with breast cancer. Platters of cookies also were brought to the palliative care unit at North Shore Hospital for the nurses and families of the patients. The students also plant flower gardens for those patients, and the senior girls are responsible for a community memorial garden at the Manhasset train station.

Like the adult organization, fundraising is an important component to the work of the Junior Coalition. In 2013, the Junior Coalition gave \$15,000 to the Adelphi program for education and \$10,000 to North Shore-LIJ.



Pink in action (left to right): Judy Taylor, Danielle Jalinos, Monica Zenobio, Meg Cunningham, Maryanne Jones, Rosa Stein and Suzy Alpert.

We shall overcome: Hitting the pavement to raise funds are (left to right): Adrienne Comerford, Judy Taylor, Terri Orlando, Suzy Alpert, Maryanne Jones, Christine Lawton, Danielle Jalinos, Rosa Stein, Keri Carlstrom, Kathleen Barry, Meg Cunningham, Mark Sauvigne and Monica Zenobio.



"By the time they're seniors," says Hull, "the girls have seen it's not just about the pink dresses; it's the ravages of the illness."

Lynn Minutillo recalls hearing about the Manhasset Breast Cancer Coalition when she moved into the community 1999.

"I remember thinking that I would someday like to become involved, especially because my mother had been actively going through treatment for her diagnosis of breast cancer," Minutillo says.

She attended many events. Then, in December of 2007, her mother-in-law was diagnosed with breast cancer. She placed a call to Forte, who was then vice president of Outreach.

"I was so thankful for the information and calm Dorothy brought to my world, and also that of my family," she says. Today, she is co-chair of the Outreach committee.

The Coalition's outreach program offers direct services to

women and their families, and education regarding breast cancer. Last year, they provided financial assistance to 74 people in Manhasset and surrounding areas with rent money, babysitting and transportation. Barbara Buckley, a resident of Douglaston, volunteers with the Coalition as a care coach, consulting with women who have been diagnosed. Her group provides advice (without specific recommendations) on doctors and hospitals, and helps the patient sort out her options. They provide books and specialty binders to keep all the insurance papers and appointments straight.

"In my several years as a care coach," says Buckley, "I have driven women to chemotherapy, arranged special exercises for them, had a wig-maker come to the house to do a private fitting after chemotherapy and hair loss, and provided food to families when a patient is going through therapy. This is so rewarding and so personal."



Sweet concern: The Jr. Coalition of the Manhasset Women's Coalition Against Breast Cancer with the holiday cookies they prepared for delivery to outreach recipients.

The newest effort of the Coalition is to help women with other cancers through their Extended Cancer Care Program.

The list of accomplishments of the Manhasset Women's Coalition is impressive. A look at their web site — www.manhassetbreastcancer.org — gives the picture of how much this determined group of women has contributed to the well-being of all women.

"Tomorrow it might be me, my daughter, my best friend," says Buckley. "It helps to know that there are other women and organizations such as MWCABC that will be there to help."

Her thoughts are echoed by Forte, whose two sisters, maternal grandmother, two maternal aunts and six other family members have had breast cancer.

"I truly feel through the work we do we have made the lives of so many just a little bit easier," says Forte. "Will we ever find a cure for this nasty disease?" ■

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