

# Breast cancer survivor panelists share their stories with the newly diagnosed

*"When does the crying stop?"*

*a brave voice asked,  
throat tight with emotion,  
tears falling unbidden.*

*We answered, each in our way,  
support and good advice.*

*But really, as long as we live and love,  
we will have losses to grieve.*

The above are the opening stanzas of a poem written by Margaret Dubay Mikus, a member of the Breast Cancer Survivors' Panel convened in October at the Cancer Wellness Center.

The October 22 panel was part of an Open Forum on Breast Cancer, co-sponsored by the Center and Highland Park Hospital. On October 8, a panel of doctors addressed 75 people at the hospital, about the medical implications of their disease. (See report on page 5)

The focus of the Survivors' Panel was to let those newly diagnosed know how breast cancer can impact their lives. Margaret and seven fellow panelists shared their stories so that others would see they, too, will reach a new place "after the dust has settled on such extensive renovation," as Margaret wrote further in her poem.

Here are their stories.

**Judy Becker** "I was diagnosed with breast cancer three years ago, when I was 35. The disease had spread to many lymph nodes and the doctors told me I needed a mastectomy and a bone marrow transplant. Before I could think about myself, I focused on our five-year-old daughter. I needed to know that she'd be taken care of on a psychological level, that there would be someone to help her when mommy got real sick and lost her hair.

Once my husband and I had found a young, nurturing child psychologist who agreed to meet with our daughter as often as needed, I began my treatment. Friends who supported me then, through my month in the hospital for the transplant and my months of chemo, try to call me a hero. But I know now that it's scarier looking in at cancer from the outside. I learned to develop a positive attitude and to appreciate life, even though that life no longer contains some things we'd hoped for, like a second child."

**Marcie Hahn** "My cancer seems to run in four-year cycles. It began 12 years ago, when I had two daughters, ages seven and nine, and a new husband,

*continued on page 4*

# Breast cancer survivor panel continued from page 1

Tom. After a modified radical mastectomy, reconstruction and six months of chemo, we thought, 'Okay, we're done with that.'

When cancer returned, this time to a rib, it was harder for Tom and me than the first time. I had the rib removed and a hysterectomy and all was quiet for another four years. We were on vacation when I felt the next tumor, this time in my forehead. The cancer later spread to my right femur, which now has a rod in it to support my leg, and to my liver. I've been on chemo for the last three years straight, and I'm doing really well.

There are no easy answers to this. I'd never choose this, but I've learned that you can live with it. And each year I get to have more time with my kids."

**Barbara Miller** I was diagnosed with Stage IV metastatic breast cancer in April, 1994 and was told I had six to 18 months to live. I was also told I had no choice but to go through the medical protocol the doctors laid out for me—a modified radical mastectomy, high doses of chemo and stem cell and bone marrow transplants.

When the treatment ended, I'd lost a breast, my job, a significant other, who could not deal with my cancer, and my family, who turned against me when I could no longer take care of my invalid father and had to put him into a nursing home.

But I've gained so much more than I've lost. I discovered the Cancer Wellness Center just a few weeks into my treatment, and the support here was wonderful. It was always difficult for me to accept help, but when I called on my friends, they saw that I never went to a single treatment alone.

Today I have a new job, and I'm absolutely fine. I really do believe everyone's support and my faith got me through it. We cannot control the disease, but we can control the way we deal with it."

**Sheila Hensley** My mother was diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer in August, 1993. After chemo and radiation, she seemed fine until last June when she went in for her six month check-up and they found more tumors. I'd just graduated from college and I decided to stay home and spend some

quality time with her.

My mother proves that cancer can find anyone, even the healthiest person. She was a school nurse and had done everything right. Now, she's no longer in active treatment and is taking steps to help us deal with her illness. She found the Cancer Wellness Center and saw that we all joined support groups here. She has even planned her funeral.

I've learned so much from her. Most of all, I've learned that we must all count our blessings and not worry about the rest."

**Margaret Dubay Mikus** My story is fairly unusual. I began as a scientist—I have a Ph.D. in microbiology and taught biology at Lake Forest College.

I began exploring unconventional medicine in 1993, when I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. By the summer of 1996 the M.S. was gone, but a routine mammogram showed a strange spot in each breast. I was scheduled for lumpectomies. I'm a singer and I had set a Buddhist meditation to music. I thought that sharing this song would be a way for me to be more comfortable and for the surgical team to know about me.

I had the words printed up on cards and everyone in the surgical suite sang the prayer which includes the words, "May I be healed. May I be a source of healing for all." The whole surgery was an incredible healing experience for all of us.

Since then, I have been attending and leading healing workshops and writing poetry about my cancer, which I know is gone. My experiences with illness have shown me that there is so much that cannot be explained by a traditional medical model.

Panel moderator and breast cancer survivor Gretchen DesJardins noted that "Everyone's cancer journey is very different. The evening allowed us to reach out and touch people just beginning their journeys, so that they felt less alone." ●