

Life After Cheating Death

Women join forces after cancer survival

Cancer changes everything, even for those who survive it. Successful treatment doesn't come without a cost — and not just the financial kind, which is itself substantial. For survivors, depression and anxiety are common. So is fear of recurrence, guilt, grief over what was lost to the disease — measured by some in scars, by others in limbs — and changes in relationships.

About 12 million Americans living today have survived cancer, according to the Mary Maguire Foundation, dedicated to helping women in Greater Cincinnati adjusting to life after treatment. While science has dramatically increased the survival rate for cancer patients, their non-medical needs have been less well served.

That's why Maureen Riopelle of Milford started the Mary Maguire Foundation, named for her mother.

"After treatment is over, it's not uncommon for the survivor to be flooded with unexpected emotions," Riopelle says. "While there is no doubt that she is thrilled that the treatment is complete, she may also experience feelings of loneliness, apprehension, depression, guilt or fear. It's also very common for survivors to have thoughts of 'Now what?'"

The answer can be overwhelming. Because "now what" can mean years of fatigue, limitations in ability to work, possible osteoporosis or infertility related to chemotherapy — and more cancer later.

Riopelle intimately knows about life with and after cancer. Her mother died of leukemia, her brother has survived melanoma and her sister has survived leukemia. Riopelle has survived breast cancer, diagnosed in 2003.

"Each time our family was confronted by cancer, I realized how incredibly lucky we were," she says. "We had the resources — emotional, social and financial — and the support of family and friends to get through. Other women and families are not so fortunate. The Mary Maguire Foundation was created so that other women and their loved ones would have the necessary support and resources as well."

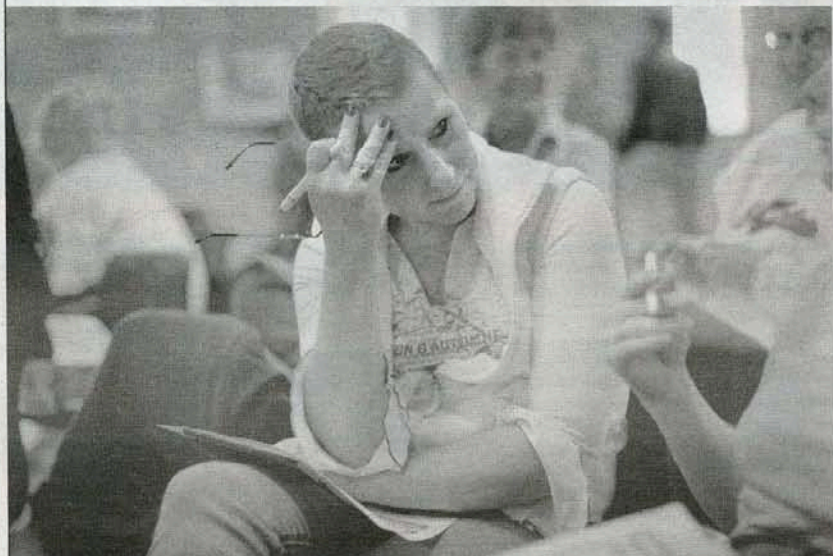
Last month the foundation held the From Surviving to Thriving weekend retreat at Camp Kern in Oregonia, Ohio. Participants — some of them having just completed chemotherapy — shared their stories, hiked, rowed canoes, practiced meditation and received massages.

One of the programs took a unique approach to recovery, the Equine Assisted Therapy session. Patients practiced equestrian "on ground skills" with specially selected horses, revealing patterns of behavior that might be causing stress and affecting well-being and relationships. The goal? To help women discover "how to more fully enjoy the present and be conscious of each moment of living as opposed to merely surviving through life," according to the foundation.

Survival can seem to take everything a person has. But then sometimes, under the right circumstances, a person can discover she has more. Cancer didn't kill her body, and it didn't kill her spirit.

This is what that kind of woman looks like, shown during their retreat.

— Gregory Flannery



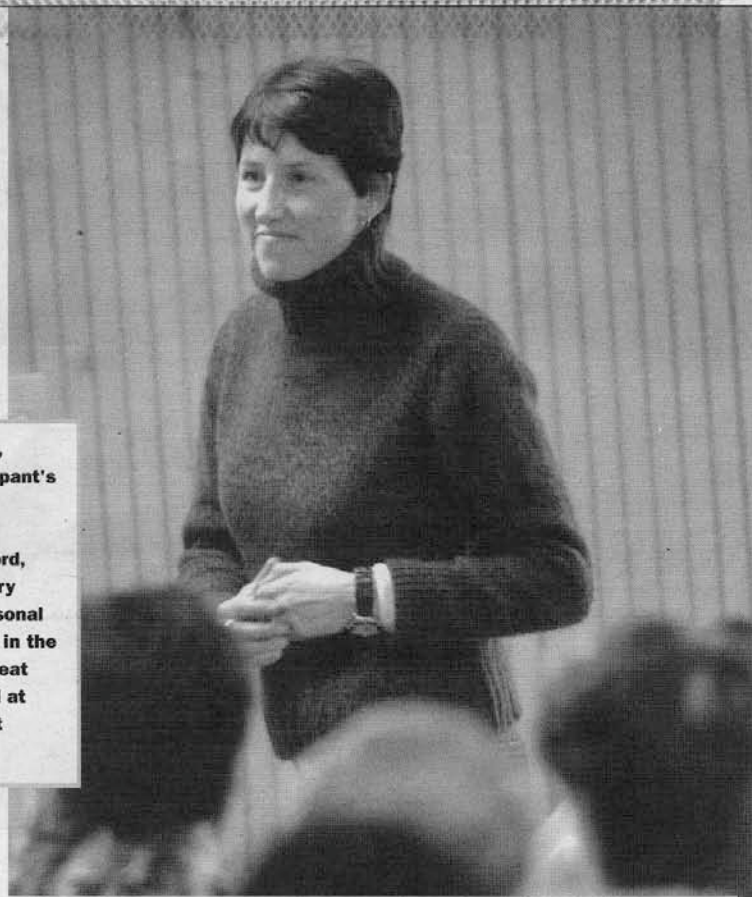
Vikki Ware (top) raises a halter to place on a questioning horse as the women on the team press up against the balloon they hold to the person in front of them during a team event at the "From Surviving to Thriving" retreat for women who have survived cancer.

Gina Huffman (bottom) of Cincinnati talks quietly with a fellow participant during a retreat presentation.

PHOTO ESSAY BY **MARK BEALER**/BEALER PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS



Debbie Booso of Milford (above), seems to ponder a fellow participant's response.



Maureen Riopelle (right) of Milford, president and founder of the Mary Maguire Foundation, gives a personal testimony to the 40 participants in the "From Surviving to Thriving" retreat for women cancer survivors held at Camp Kern in Oregonia, Ohio last month.



Vicki Ware (above) carries her yoga mat to a session.

Lynne Mayo (below) of Cincinnati, OH, asks a question of the exercise captains at the retreat.





Elaine Moore of Perrysburg, OH, at left, and Lin Chetwood, of Batavia paddle a canoe on the lake at Camp Kern.



Jacqueline Hullaby of Cincinnati, front, and Cynthia Dean from Loveland, OH paddle a canoe on a cool day around the lake during the retreat.



Lynn Baumann, of Batavia center, hugs Gretchen Reifsnyder of Cincinnati as Vicki Ware at left hugs a participant during a "find your nearest Angel" moment during the retreat.