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THE VIEW EAST

Giving East End Cancer Patients a Fighting Chance

By Reynolds Dodson

The thing about cancer is that it only happens to other people. That annoying ache in the ear, that little pain in the throat—that doesn't mean anything to you and me. But just suppose. Every year, 1,000 people on the East End get the kind of news no one wants to hear, and when that happens, it's devastating. Some years ago, it happened to Sag Harbor resident Charlotte Noble Selheim, who was diagnosed with lung cancer. Neither she nor her family knew where to turn. As Ms. Selheim's son, Duncan Darrow, a successful New York attorney, soon realized, it wasn't just the specter of mortality that was so horrible; it was the many details nobody ever thinks about: where to seek treatment, how to deal with the insurance company, who will pay the bills, who will cook the meals. At one point, Mr. Darrow said to himself, "All I ask is that my mother be given a fighting chance"—and that's when an idea was born. Fighting Chance, founded by Mr. Darrow, is now in its seventh year as the East End's only organi-

zation solely dedicated to helping cancer patients cope with all aspects of the disease. Headquartered in a welcoming Victorian on Route 114 in Sag Harbor, it has helped hundreds of frightened people through the labyrinthine maze of treatment, support and recovery. Next Thursday, July 9, at 8 p.m., SEA-TV in Southampton and LTV in East Hampton will carry the first documentary devoted to Fighting Chance. It's a 40-minute production called "Cancer Journeys on the East End: The Patients of Fighting Chance," and it should be viewed by anyone who wants to understand this illness. Far from being the "downer" you might expect, it's a stirring tribute to the human spirit made more piquant by its focus on real people living here on the East End. Recently, I talked to Ben Gillikin, Fighting Chance's vice chairman, and Maxa Luppi, a "patient navigator." Ben is a former cosmetics company executive who now lives in East Hampton, and Maxa is a Water Mill resident whose late husband, Dick, was a friend of mine. There are a lot of charities with good intentions, but Fighting Chance is unusual in its local focus

and thorough professionalism. If you or a loved one are diagnosed with cancer, they are there to guide you every step of the way, through therapy, drug trials, financial aid, caregiving. This is more difficult than you might realize. First, most of us have very little understanding of cancer, and what little we do have becomes clouded under the blow of a dreaded diagnosis. You may ask yourself: What are my chances of survival? Where do I go for therapy? What about my job? What about my family? You see, it's not just the cancer victim who's affected; it's everyone around him. Fighting Chance recognizes this and has trained psychologists and specialists ready to take the whole family by the hand. One of the concerns I had when talking to Ben and Maxa was how Fighting Chance balances hope against candor. After all, every patient needs hope, but hope doesn't always pan out. Ben explained that they are always honest with patients, yet purposefully optimistic. "We don't talk about mortality rates," he explained, "just survival rates" (which, in fact, are considerably higher than you might expect). Their headquarters is full of literature providing the most up-to-date knowledge of every kind of cancer, and there is a beautifully presented "Resource Guide" that lists every organization an East Ender can turn to for help. (You can access it on the Web at fighting-chance.org.) As you watch the documentary, you'll meet survivors from Montauk, Sag Harbor, Springs, Southampton, Amagansett and Sagaponack. They have overcome cancers as diverse

as lung, pancreatic, colon and brain. Here are some nuggets I took away:

- If you're diagnosed with cancer, beware the internet. It's a cesspool of negativism and misinformation. Fighting Chance will steer you to websites you can trust.
- If you're a friend of the victim, don't tell her you know how she feels. You don't. Just be there to help.
- The East End offers an unusually "strong sense of place," which can be beneficial in overcoming the "self-isolating" nature of the disease. Survivors tell moving stories of how friends and neighbors all pitched in to help. (One man from Montauk, who logged 10,000 miles in travel to get chemotherapy, had all his gasoline bills paid by the Montauk Fire Department.) There will also be a special presentation of this program at the Bay Street Theatre on July 12, but I would urge anybody who thinks he can give up an episode of whatever silly thing is on network TV next Thursday to tune in to one of the public access channels and watch this show. It will be well worth your while.

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