

Tracking the Journeys of Local Cancer Victims

New Film Tracks East End Cancer Journeys

By Marissa Maier

Duncan Darrow, founder of Fighting Chance a counseling and resource center for East End cancer patients located in Sag Harbor, says that every cancer patient's journey begins with three simple words; "You have cancer."

After this sobering news is delivered, the road to recovery differs for each patient depending on the severity of their cancer and the applicable treatment. A new documentary, titled "Cancer Journeys on the East End: The Patients of Fighting Chance," deftly illuminates the journey of several cancer survivors living on the East End. Bay Street Theatre is hosting a free public screening of the film on Sunday, July 12, at 2 p.m. and it will also be broadcast on LTV, channel 20, and SEA-TV, channel 22, on Thursday, July 9.

"We wanted to lift up the voice of the cancer patients to show their distinctive experience. For many years people didn't want to mention the word 'cancer.' Yet we heard from patients that that shouldn't be the case," said Darrow, who co-produced the film with Genie Henderson.

True to Darrow's words, the patients in the film, who go by first names only, describe their experiences with unflinching honesty. From grappling with the initial cancer diagnosis to celebrating its remission, the group of six local survivors, and one father who cared for his son diagnosed with leukemia, depicted the peaks and valleys of their cancer journeys in vivid detail.

After Lonnie, a Southampton resident, learned he had lung cancer, he recalls sitting in his car crying.

"It was like being kicked in the stomach," remembered Lonnie of his diagnosis.

"You prepare for everything but the cancer diagnosis," said John from Montauk, who visited his doctor after having an earache only to learn that he had stage four tonsil cancer. "Hearing I had cancer felt like a ton of bricks."

"The disease is like your worst flu combined with your worst hangover," said John, describing his illness.

Although the film is peppered with cancer statistics and information on the operations and resources available at Fighting Chance, Darrow contends the experiences described by the six survivors is



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the heart of the film. The idea for the documentary was born out of a half hour segment about Fighting Chance, which aired on LTV last summer. LTV later approached the not-for-profit organization to do a follow-up piece, and Darrow saw this as an opportunity to give some local cancer survivors a voice.

"We felt that if we could find patients to go on camera it would be a compelling basis for a film. It required courage, but a lot of them were grateful. They saw this as a way to provide guidance for the next guy [who was diagnosed]," recalled Darrow, who added that the documentary was filmed and edited by Lily Henderson.

One point the survivors in the film are adamant about is how the support of friends, family, their community and the staff at Fighting Chance helped them overcome their cancer.

"Don't do it alone. I can't stress that enough ... doing it alone will kill you," Lonnie advised in the film.

"If you have cancer you don't want to get out of bed because you know something bad is going to happen. But Fighting Chance is out of bed, making calls and describing options to you ... by going there I felt better and I recovered better and felt part of a cancer community," added John.

Richard of Sag Harbor, who was the father of the boy diagnosed with leukemia, said organizations



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like Fighting Chance fill in the gaps left open by doctors and hospitals. The staff at Fighting Chance help patients in a variety of ways, by negotiating with insurance companies to cover the costs of necessary treatment, providing counseling services with oncology social workers, offering transportation to radiation and chemotherapy appointments and free access to cleaning services. Darrow adds that a network of relatives and community members are vital to cancer survival, and are often "the unsung heroes" of the cancer journey.

"People don't think of the tiny little things ... they think it just stops with surgery [or treatment], but if you have children and have cancer, who takes care of the children? Who takes you to the doctor? Who cooks dinner? Who cleans the house?" asks Suzee of Amagansett, who was diagnosed with breast cancer while she was the fulltime caretaker for her severely ill husband.

After suffering through the trials and tribulations of treating their cancer and ultimately beating it, many survivors say in the film that their outlook on life was completely altered.

"I think this experience has allowed him to focus. He is a kid who takes nothing for granted," said Richard of his son. Anne, a Sagaponack resident who is still in the midst of battling lung and brain cancer, said she learned to calm down and not busy herself through life.



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"I live life with a passion now," remarked Suzee, as she ambled around in her garden in the film.

For Darrow, who lost his mother to lung cancer which prompted him to establish Fighting Chance in 2002, continuing the operations of his organization and keeping its doors open remains his passion. Instead of touting his own accomplishments, Darrow tends to focus on those who benefit from the services of his organization and the tireless work of the Fighting Chance staff.

"Fighting Chance is like a navigator [for cancer patients]. At one point in the film, Bob [a cancer survivor] said his journey was a bit like going down a river. We are the navigator of the river for these patients," explained Darrow. "For most people, they have no life experience that prepares them for cancer, but this is our business. We [at Fighting Chance] fight cancer. That is what we do all day long."

Bay Street Theatre will host a free, public screening of "Cancer Journeys on the East End: The Patients of Fighting Chance" on Sunday, July 12, at 2 p.m. The theatre is located on Long Wharf in Sag Harbor. To reserve seats call 725-4646. The documentary will air on LTV, channel 20, from 8 to 9 p.m., and on SEA-TV, channel 22 (check local listings for air times) on Thursday, July 9.