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Sep 14 2012

Mary Jo's cancer story: "It's been an incredible journey"



Written by Kathleen Szmit



Kathleen Szmit Photo

JOURNEYING TOGETHER – Mary Jo and Ken Keenan have been married 21 years. Mary Jo said their partnership has been a huge source of strength during her ongoing journey with ovarian cancer.

Mary Jo Keenan wants people to know something: she has cancer. Not "cancer" said in a hushed, cautious whisper. Cancer: bold, matter-of-fact, and clearly stated.

Keenan has cancer, and while it's certainly not okay, she is doing her best not to let it define her. With an outpouring of support from family, friends and one surprise source, Keenan isn't simply surviving. She's thriving.

"I was first diagnosed in 2006," Keenan said during an interview at her home in Harwich.

After a year of treatment for the ovarian cancer that snuck up on her with nary a symptom, she was in great shape. Unfortunately a routine CAT scan showed a new tumor on her pelvic bone.

"When they performed surgery, they discovered that the cancer was everywhere," Keenan said. "Sometimes cancers don't show up on scans."

A seven-hour surgery was conducted, during which infected areas were rebuilt or resected. The subsequent

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chemotherapy robbed Keenan of her energy and her hair.

Cancer proved a stubborn foe, hanging on in spite of treatments, necessitating more surgery and more chemo. Not surprisingly, Keenan admitted to more than a few "dark days."

But there was something keeping her going. Actually, it was someone. Many of them, really. Along with her devoted husband, Ken, her three "amazing" sons Jared, Nathaniel and Will, Jared's wife, Bri, and Nathaniel and Will's girlfriends, Ashley and Alicia, was a veritable army of well-wishers, amassed during Keenan's 35 years of teaching in Barnstable Schools.

"The response and support of Barnstable students and families has been incredible," Keenan said, adding that she's received support from students and colleagues she knew at the start of her career. "I was blown away by the support."

Retired as of last year, Keenan was still teaching during her initial diagnosis and treatment, though eventually not full time.

It was being in her classroom, the Multi-Age at Hyannis East and then the Barnstable Community Horace Mann Charter Public School (where Ken was also principal), and having to discuss her illness with her young students that proved helpful and healing.

"One thing that helped me overcome my fears was to have to figure out a way to explain my situation to my students," Keenan said. "It made me have to internalize all the ways to talk about it."

Keenan said she ultimately realized there were ways to talk about her cancer without fear.

"The goal was not to have anyone be uncomfortable," Keenan said.

By candidly answering her students' questions about her head scarves and her lack of hair, Keenan found herself realizing that honesty was the key to quelling fears in her students, and in herself.

"As I was [helping them be unafraid] I started thinking, 'I'm, okay. I'm still me. I still have the same likes, the same loves,'" Keenan said. "That made me internalize that 'you are still you.'"

Between her Barnstable connections and her family, Keenan began navigating the tumultuous waters of cancer, including the news that in order to keep it at bay, she must undergo chemo once a month indefinitely.

The positive energy she receives from her family and continues to receive from her Barnstable friends has also helped her to put her situation into perspective.

"This is not a feel sorry, pity me story," Keenan said. "Every day I'm determined to do something that's joyous."

Keenan keeps a "Joy Jar" on her counter into which she puts pieces of paper inscribed with daily joys, such as a cardinal at her bird feeder, a walk with Ken, a letter from a friend, or the simple act of enjoying a moment of solitude.

"It's about staying positive and knowing you still have all the things you had before you had cancer," Keenan said.

Ken, having seen all that his wife has endured as the result of the cancer, is profoundly inspired by her willingness to soldier on.

"We all feel as a family, as she undergoes her cancer journey, all of us are so incredibly impressed by the humility and strength that she has shown," Ken said. "She has taught us how to take on a very difficult situation and we learn so much from her each day."

Keenan is also deeply grateful for her husband's unwavering devotion, playfully referring to him as "Saint Ken."

"Ken is Mr. Humble," Keenan said. "But it's a partnership. If I didn't have Ken, I don't think I'd have the positive mind frame I have now. He's pretty unbelievable."

Ken, her kids, her former students, colleagues and their families, have become a powerful reminder to Keenan that life, in spite of cancer, is good.

"If I give up, then what am I saying? That cancer has won? I have too much to live for," Keenan said. "I had too much to live for before I had cancer, and those things are still there. It's been an incredible journey. Cancer isn't going to take all that away from me."

September is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. Consider supporting the following local organizations as a means of prevention and finding a cure: www.girlygirlparts.net, www.ribbonstoremember.org, Dancing For A Cure (dancingforacure.net), or the National Cancer Society.

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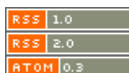
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