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Cancer survivor finds a way to give back and make a difference

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By **Staten Island Advance**

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(Editor's note: This is the first in a series of Portraits of Hope that will run throughout May. These first-person accounts of cancer survivors are being run in partnership with the American Cancer Society.)

All cancer survivors have a different story to tell. I hope by sharing mine, I can be an inspiration and give hope to even one person touched by the disease. The words, "you have cancer," are very difficult for anyone to hear.

I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in January 2009. Ovarian cancer has symptoms that can be very vague, and most often it's not diagnosed until in the later stages. When I look back now, I had all the typical symptoms. But like most women, they really didn't seem unusual at the time. My gynecological oncologist later told me that I could have been checked every month and still not have been diagnosed in an early stage – that's how fast it can spread. She compared it to blowing on a dandelion.

I went to the doctor after experiencing some on-and-off symptoms, although I didn't think they were anything serious. He scheduled several tests; when the results came back, he called my husband and me into his office.

I will never forget the feeling that came over me when he gave me the results. I couldn't believe he was telling me I most likely had cancer and it was spreading. He already had set up an appointment for the next day with a top oncologist.

As we walked out of his office, I felt every emotion possible – fear, anger, guilt and denial. All I kept thinking was: How am I going to tell my family? How am I going to teach tomorrow? I cried myself to sleep that night.

NO MORE TEARS

But when I got up in the morning, I made the decision that I was not going to cry anymore. I was



Photo Courtesy of Donna LaBargo

Cancer survivor Donna LaBargo, shown here with her husband Joe, joined the American Cancer Society's Relay For Life in the hopes of one day finding a cure for the disease.

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going to fight. I went to the oncologist and told her I was going to do whatever was needed to beat this disease.

Following surgery and chemotherapy, I beat the odds and won my battle. I had excellent doctors, a loving husband, an amazing son and parents, a loyal network of friends and my everlasting faith in God.

I also had the help of an incredible organization that was with me through every step of my cancer journey. The American Cancer Society not only funds cancer research to one day find a cure, but also helps people who are battling cancer now. They provided me with free services such as the "Look Good Feel Better" program, educational literature about my diagnosis and a wonderful support group for women with ovarian cancer.

RELAY FOR LIFE

After my recovery, I wanted to somehow make a difference. I had heard of Relay For Life and decided I wanted to give back and join the American Cancer Society in fighting cancer. I formed a team that brought together my school, family, friends and the women from my group.

I set a goal of \$1,000, and little by little the donations began to pour in. I couldn't believe our team raised over \$8,500 by the day of the event. The second year we raised close to \$10,000. I also joined the planning committee my second year in hopes of giving more of my time to the cause. I had found my way to make a difference.

Relay For Life is an uplifting and empowering day for me. It truly is a day to celebrate my life and the lives of my family members - including both my parents - and some very dear friends who have also survived cancer. They are my heroes.

I also participate in memory of my loved ones who have lost their battle. They are my guardian angels. This year, I am dedicating my walk to my entire support team as well. I couldn't have done it without them.

I am now a three-year survivor and remain cancer-free. I am looking forward to another great day of celebrating and remembering life at Relay for Life 2012.

Donna LaBargo, a Grant City resident, is the first in a series of Portraits of Hope being run in the Health section throughout May. The first-person accounts lead up to the American Cancer Society's first Relay For Life, held June 2 at Wagner College.

Get ready to relay

Relay For Life is an American Cancer Society event that celebrates survivors, remembers loved ones lost to cancer and fights back against the disease. This year, there are two Relays open to all Staten Island residents.

When and where

June 2 at 1 p.m.
Wagner College,
Grymes Hill
July 14 at 6 p.m.
Henry Kaufmann Campgrounds,
Sea View
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relayforlife.org

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For the Relay For Life of Staten Island, which is June 2 from 2pm-1am at Wagner, visit: <http://www.relayforlife.org/statenislandny>

For the Relay For Life of Mid Island at Henry Kauffmann Campground on July 14-15 from 4pm-9am, visit: www.relayforlife.org/henrykauffmanncampgroundsny

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