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Cancer survival planted seed for BraveHearts

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Marge Tautkus Gunnar learned that she had ovarian cancer in 1993.

During her months of chemotherapy treatment, she said she derived courage and strength from family and friends, but also from the deep and soulful connection she had to her Lipizzan stallion, Neapolitano IV Farica – Max.

"One day when feeling particularly depressed, my sister bundled me into the car and we headed to the barn," Gunnar writes on www.braveheartsriding.org. "When I entered Max's stall, he looked at me with large soft eyes that seemed to question 'Where have you been?' I threw my arms around his neck, buried my face in his mane and sobbed. Max wrapped his neck around me and squeezed. I felt that connection between us even more powerfully, and I knew that Max was one of the reasons I just had to get well. Although I didn't know it at the time, it was then that the seed for BraveHearts was sown."

By 1998, Gunnar was cancer-free. But she said she was plagued with the nagging question of why had she survived a disease to which all too many women succumb?

In the spring of 1999, Marge came to the realization that she would like to enable others who are in distress to feel the healing and strength she felt through her connection with her beloved Max. She began volunteering at a therapeutic riding center and was immediately impressed with the life-changing effect this type of therapy can have on individuals of all ages and with many different special needs.

A little more than two years after starting as a volunteer, it was time to start moving forward.

BraveHearts was incorporated in 2002. The riding program began in the fall of 2003.

Cardiologist Dr. Rolf M. Gunnar accepted the invitation to join the Board of Directors after visiting the riding program in October 2004, and ultimately became chairman of the board.

Dr. Rolf and Marge Gunnar were married 5 1/2 years ago.

Without the benefit of owning property or horses, the board decided to start the riding program at Fantasy Friesian Farm in Harvard. In 2005, BraveHearts assumed ownership of that property.

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In 2007, BraveHearts became a Premier Accredited Center of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association.

In 2010, the BraveHearts Corp. completed a merger with The Bergmann Centre, a therapeutic horseback riding facility located in Poplar Grove. Located on 17 acres, the 55,000-square-foot indoor facility allowed expansion of programming to include hippotherapy as well as non-equine outpatient services in speech language pathology, physical therapy and occupational therapy.

In addition, plans are under way to create a national educational-conference center at the facility, which was re-named BraveHearts at The Bergmann Centre.

Programs now include therapeutic horseback riding, hippotherapy, therapeutic carriage driving, a large and comprehensive program for military veterans and Gold Star families, and summer day camps, as well as horticultural therapy.

Max died two years ago. "And I'll never get over losing him," Gunnar told the Northwest Herald this week. "But his daughters carry on the tradition of the lipizzan breed in our program – one is a therapeutic driving horse and the other is a therapeutic riding horse."

Source: www.braveheartsriding.org and Northwest Herald reports

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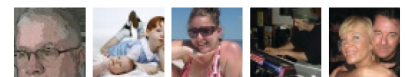
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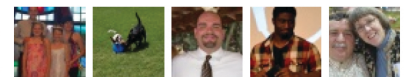
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