

# BREAST CANCER AWARENESS 2025

STRENGTH • COURAGE • HOPE

Survivor stories • Basics and resources • Sources of support



**"I've had an evolution in my thinking and a greater openness to life in general."**

Allyson Irish



**"Cancer ended up being a vehicle of change for me."**

Jennifer Bates



**"Helping others can help you get through it."**

Lillian Montalto



**"I focus on living a life of gratitude."**

Mendy Garron



*A special publication of The Eagle-Tribune, The Salem News, The Daily News of Newburyport, the Gloucester Daily Times, the Andover Townsman and The Haverhill Gazette*

# Some of the basics of breast cancer

Breast cancer is a formidable disease that affects millions of individuals each year. Data from the World Health Organization indicates that 2.3 million women were diagnosed with breast cancer in 2022, when it was the most common form of the disease in 157 of 185 countries across the globe.

The impact of breast cancer goes beyond those diagnosed with the disease, affecting friends, family members, professional colleagues and others. That far-reaching impact means that everyone has a vested interest in learning about breast cancer.

## What is breast cancer?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that breast cancer occurs when cells in the breast grow out of control. The breast is made up of

three main parts known as the lobules, ducts and connective tissue, and which type of breast cancer a person has depends on which cells turn into cancer.

## Is there a typical breast cancer?

No two individuals diagnosed with breast cancer will have the same experience after being diagnosed. However, the CDC notes that most breast cancers begin in the ducts or lobules. The ducts are tubes that carry milk to the nipple and the lobules are the glands that produce milk.

## What are some common risk factors for breast cancer?

The National Breast Cancer Foundation notes that gender is the foremost risk factor for breast cancer, as the WHO reports that 99% of breast cancers occur in women. Additional risk

factors for breast cancer include age, with 2 out of 3 women diagnosed with invasive breast cancer being older than 55, and race, as the disease affects more Caucasian women than

women of other races.

The NBCF also notes that women who have dense breast tissue may be at greater risk because such tissue can make it harder to detect lumps.



and age are beyond women's control, but there are some controllable risk factors that can be avoided. The WHO notes that overconsumption of alcohol and tobacco use are two such factors.

## How important is early detection?

The American Cancer Society reports that the five-year survival rate for breast cancers discovered in the localized stage is 99%. That underscores the significance of early detection. The NBCF notes that monthly self-exams and routine clinical exams increase the likelihood of early detection.

Women are urged to speak with their physicians regarding how frequently they should be tested, as recommendations vary depending on each individual and their respective family histories.

## What causes breast cancer?

The NBCF notes that most women who have breast cancer will never be able to identify an exact cause behind their disease. Common risk factors like gender

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to reflect on the memory of lives lost and offer thanks for those who have survived. This year, we especially honor the memory of Gerard Moynihan, a staunch supporter of this initiative whose wife, Sandra, passed away in 2005.

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# Possible early warning signs to watch for

Women are often their own strongest allies in the fight against breast cancer. While a strong support network can be vital when receiving treatment for breast cancer, women who have not been diagnosed with the disease still have an important role to play in combating it and potentially reducing its impact on their lives.

The World Cancer Research Fund reports that breast cancer is the second most common cancer worldwide and the No. 1 cancer in women across the globe. But women are not helpless against breast cancer. In fact, various organizations encourage women to take a proactive approach in relation to the disease and begin conducting routine self-examinations in young adulthood.

Self-exams can uncover signs of the disease and propel treatment when it is in its earliest stages, a point in time when breast cancer is most treatable.

Though the disease does not always produce symptoms in its early stages, women can keep an eye out for these signs each day, including when conducting self-exams.

► **New lump or mass:** This is perhaps the most widely known symptom of breast cancer, but it's important that women avoid jumping to conclusions should they uncover a new lump or mass during a self-exam. That's because most breast lumps are not cancer, according to the American Cancer Society. The ACS notes that a painless, hard mass with irregular edges is more likely to be cancer but also acknowledges cancer-related lumps or masses can be soft, round, tender or painful.

► **Swelling of all or part of a breast:** Swelling may be a sign of breast cancer even if no lump is felt.

► **Skin dimpling:** The dimpling that may be symptomatic of breast cancer can look like the exterior of an orange peel.

► **Pain:** Some women experience pain in the breast or nipple before a breast cancer diagnosis.

► **Nipple retraction:** This symptom is marked by the nipple turning inward.

► **Skin issues on the nipple or breast:** Skin on the nipple or breast may redden, dry, flake or thicken when a woman has breast cancer.

► **Nipple discharge:** The discharge will be something other than breast milk.

► **Swollen lymph nodes under the arm or near the collarbone:** This swelling may indicate the breast cancer has spread even before the original tumor in the breast reached a size large enough to be felt.

The ACS urges women who discover any of these symptoms to report them to a health care professional immediately. Though each symptom is not necessarily indicative of the presence of breast cancer, it's still important to seek treatment.



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# Hooked on hope

## Mendy Garron channels pain from experience into poetry and fly-fishing

By Gail McCarthy  
» gmccarthy@northofboston.com

Many women share their stories about their breast cancer diagnosis and treatment in the hope of helping someone else who is just starting this traumatic journey of their own.

Gloucester's Mendy Garron, who faced a diagnosis at the age of 44, did something a little different. She wrote a poetry book, sharing an intimate look at the horror of receiving the news, as well as the strength she encourages other women to find, cheerleading others on to find that place of feminine power.

Garron recently published

"Awakening From the Numbness: A collection of thoughts on life emerging from cancer treatment, divorce, relationships, and finding my divine self again."

This poetry collection grew out of a writing challenge that she undertook one summer, and the words just kept flowing onto the pages.

"One thing that really surprised me after I started to talk about this was how people would come out of the woodwork. I was realizing how many people breast cancer impacts, whether it was the women going through their diagnosis or family members reaching

out to find out how to support their loved ones," Garron said. "I've had many people reach out, asking me questions."

Her response to them is a reminder that this is a very individual journey. Treatment is customized to each patient, based on the type of cancer you have, your age, health and so many other factors.

"And I think understanding that is very helpful, too," Garron said. "There is a large community out there, whether support groups or other groups where you can have these conversations with others."

The 56-page book is described as an emotional



COURTESY PHOTOS

Gloucester's Mendy Garron recently published a poetry book: "Awakening From the Numbness: A collection of thoughts on life emerging from cancer treatment, divorce, relationships, and finding my divine self again."

collection of poems that illuminate the ups and downs of cancer survivorship, divorce, heartbreak, and finding your voice and internal power to live life with gratitude and hope.

-----  
*Today is the day I got the call*

*Today is the day when cancer changed it all*  
— Excerpt from the poem  
"The Day"

-----  
A note on the back cover of Garron's book states:  
"This emotional tribute to finding yourself in the face

of physical and emotional pain reveals a heartfelt transformation of reflection and emergence to reclaim your power. Each poem is a fervent display of the trials and tribulations of life and feelings during the uncertain period of cancer

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recovery and relationship challenges. Whether you are facing your own challenges or wanting more hope in your daily life, this collection will inspire you to reach for more."

The sharing of stories may provide validation for other women that they are not alone in facing this diagnosis.

"The feedback has been wonderful," Garron said. "I've had women of different ages who have reached out to say how they can relate and they find it inspiring. For me, I couldn't ask for anything more."

When she was going through treatment, she posted often about her story.

"My whole intent was that if I can help just one other person, then it is worth it," she said. "And people have encouraged me to keep telling my story. They appreciate the openness and honesty of the challenges I faced. I think that was part of my writing this poetry collection."



Mendy Garron and her son, Odin, pose during a saltwater fishing trip off the coast of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

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*I can do this even though it is hard*

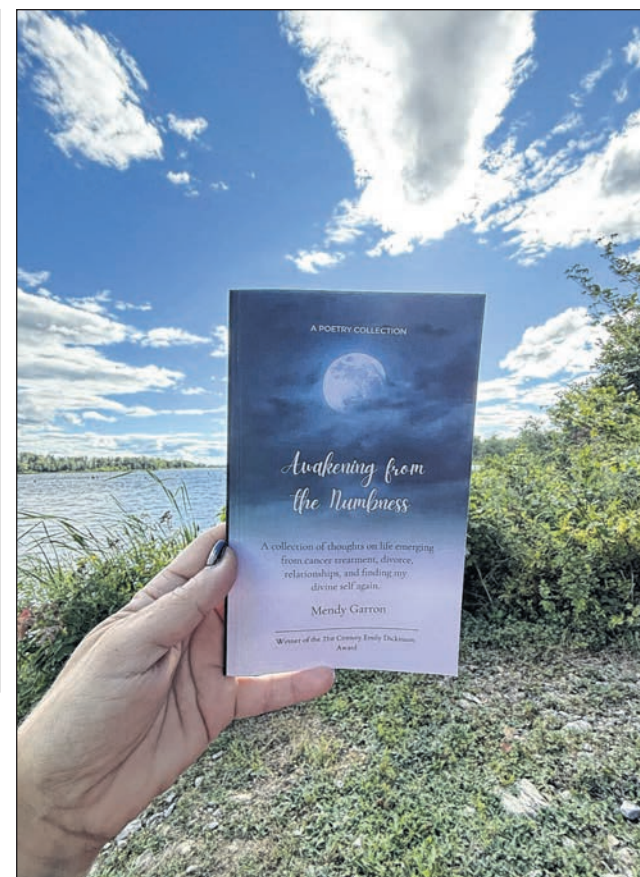
*I am strong, capable, beautiful and scarred*

— Excerpt from the poem  
"The Fight"

-----  
Garron, the mother of an eighth grader at the time of her 2021 diagnosis, never imagined that this would be the outcome of a routine screening. Although

the disease was found early, it was a widespread tumor that led to a double mastectomy, radiation and hormone suppression therapy.

See **GARRON**, Page 6



Garron holds up a copy of her poetry collection, published this summer and available through Amazon and other online retailers.

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## » Garron

Continued from Page 5

To intensify the situation, it was a challenging personal time for her, as she was going through a divorce.

“And as a parent, at least for me, the first thing that goes through your head when you get diagnosed is the outlook of your future. You wonder will I be there for his high school graduation, a college graduation, a wedding — and that adds to that emotion and mental aspect of the disease,” she said. “I had to heal, but I also had my son to take care of. I think as a woman, you do what you have to do, and again, it’s when I started to draw on other women’s experience and their stories and their triumphs. That kept me going, and that’s why I decided to share because I was impacted by other people and their perseverance — and their grit gave me hope.”

As she continues her



COURTESY PHOTOS

**Mendy Garron displays a catch while fly-fishing in Montana.**

journey of healing, Garron said one thing that has changed is the way she looks at the world.

“One difference is my perspective on things,” she said. “I think I’ve learned to try to look at the positive things in my life. I focus on living a life of gratitude, and I think that has been the biggest shift for me.”

The book synopsis states: “Mendy leaned into the daily practice of gratitude

and finding the strength and hope to inspire recovery and moving on in the next chapter of life. Mendy turned to writing to help with the recovery process and crafted poems to capture the essence of deep feelings and transformation throughout her experiences.”

Garron — who works as a marine mammal emergency response coordinator for NOAA Fisheries in Gloucester — also has an interest in the arts, including drawing, painting and photography. With an affinity for nature, she finds solace and healing out in the natural environment.

And in an unusual twist, Garron found healing through fly-fishing.

“This is a big part of my recovery story,” she said. “After all of my surgeries and once I felt up to it, one of my goals was to get out into nature and really live life. So in 2023, I went to Montana to visit a friend.”

She enrolled in a women’s-only fly-fishing class for

three days outside Yellowstone National Park.

“I’ve been fly-fishing here and there ever since, trying to get more experience,” she said.

She was searching for local fishing clubs when she came across Casting for Recovery, which offers free breast cancer fly-fishing wellness retreats across the country, providing emotional support and peer connections. Participants are selected through a lottery, and all expenses are covered by the nonprofit organization.

Garron was on a waiting list and then got a call earlier this year that a space had opened up for a retreat in New Hampshire.

“It was a phenomenal experience,” she said. “I’m a marine mammal biologist, so I obviously love wild-life, but for me, unplugging and being out in nature was healing. You are grounding yourself and going back to where life began.”

In a “Monday Gratitude”



**Garron rings the bell to signify her final radiation treatment in 2022.**

post, she wrote:

“This was one of those things that I believe the Universe put into my life through divine timing. Among the staff/volunteers at the retreat included a breast cancer surgical oncologist, oncologist physician’s assistant, social worker

and psychologist. It was a fly-fishing intensive weekend, learning and practicing casting, knot tying, and entomology, but we also had breast cancer support sessions and discussions. One thing that was really helpful was the surgical oncologist provided specific exercises and stretches for patients to do prior to fishing. (I always get very sore after fishing using my chest muscles in a way that I don’t on a day-day basis.)

“The weekend was filled with laughter, tears, excitement, encouragement and hope,” Garron continued. “It was pure magic and I continue to be in awe of the strength, grit, determination and grace of the women impacted by this disease. My hope is to continue being involved with this organization and volunteering in the future to give others the experience that I, along with my cohort, desperately needed and am so grateful to have had the opportunity and support.”

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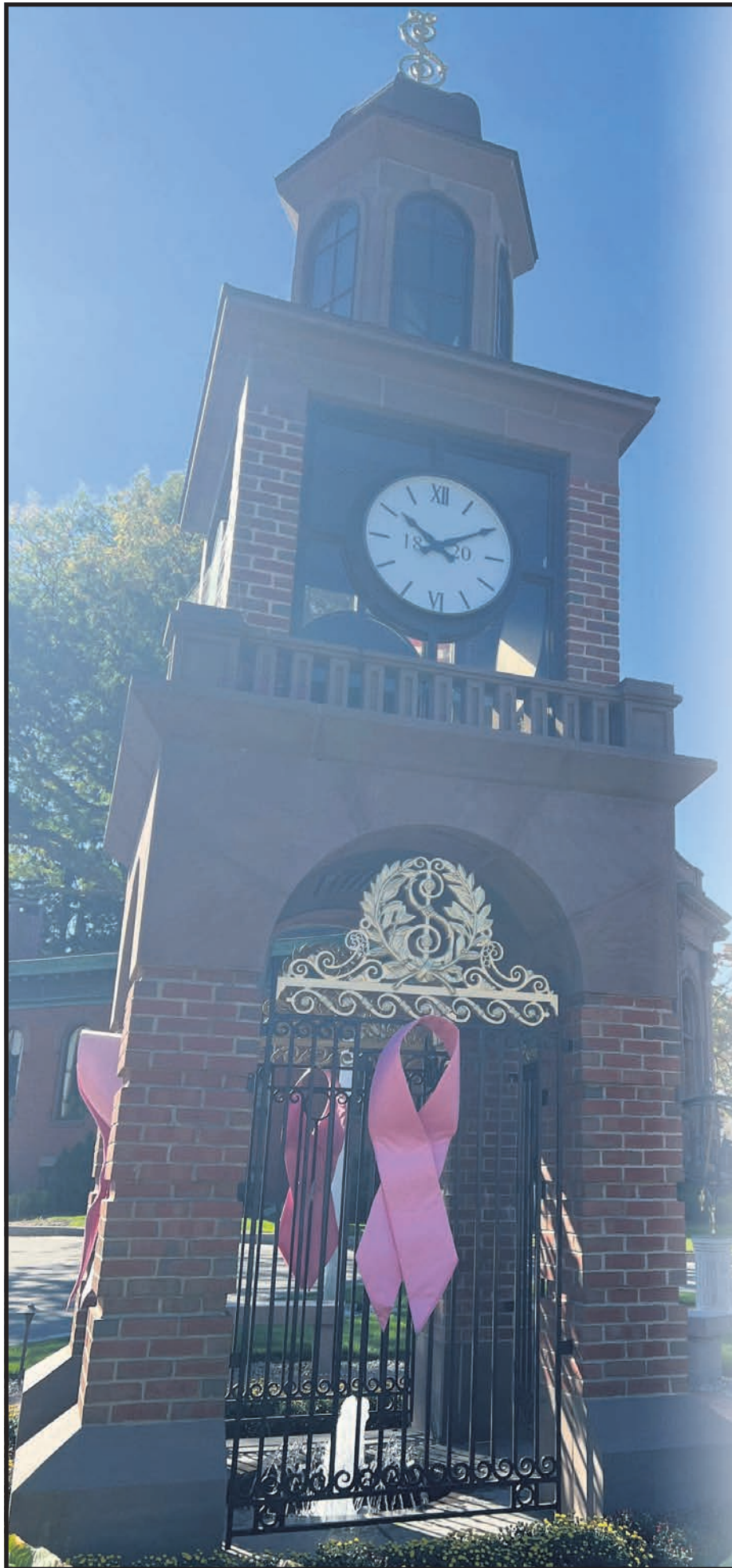


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# We're Banking on Hope.

October shines a light on breast cancer awareness, but the strength of survivors shines all year long.

This October, we honor the fighters, remember the loved ones lost, and champion the hope for a future free from breast cancer.

**Stop by any Institution for Savings office during October to pick up a free pink ribbon pin and show your support.** And remember: early detection saves lives. This Breast Cancer Awareness Month, prioritize your health and remind the women you love to do the same by scheduling your annual screenings. Early detection can save lives.

**Together, let's turn awareness into action and hope into healing.**



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 **Breast  
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# Providing ‘a beacon of hope’

## North of Boston Cancer Resource has been helping empower survivors for nearly a decade

“At 47, my world turned upside down with a diagnosis of stage 3 breast cancer just four months after a clear mammogram,” said breast cancer survivor Jennifer Bates, who lives in Newburyport. “With two teenagers to raise, I had to lean on my community like never before. In doing so, I discovered a beacon of hope, North of Boston Cancer Resource.”

For more than nine years, North of Boston Cancer Resource has been making the journey of survivors like Bates and their families a bit easier to navigate. What started as a dream of five local women, professionals in the health and wellness field, has become a valuable and growing resource for people seeking additional support and services after receiving a cancer diagnosis.

NBCR’s vision of enhanced well-being and survivorship for people with cancer in our community by offering support that cares for the whole person has been its driving force. Over the last nine years, NBCR has enriched, empowered and educated thousands of people affected by cancer. Previously funded solely by donations and grants, NBCR held its first 5K fundraiser this year so it could continue offering free access to the healing services that have benefited Bates and so many others, services that are often not covered by insurance.

“NBCR connected me with one of their manual lymph drainage practitioners, Erin Hanson — a gifted healer who has since become a dear friend,” Bates said. “Erin’s therapeutic lymphatic drainage massages, which I was able to receive through NBCR’s gift certificate program, have been a vital part of my journey.

“After having all the lymph

nodes on my left side removed and choosing a double mastectomy with a flat closure, the holistic support she provided felt like a lifeline,” Bates said. “Her compassionate, down-to-earth demeanor eased my discomfort, allowing me to feel more at ease with my new body.”

“A cancer diagnosis can be devastating and disorienting, not to mention a financial burden,” said Dina Crawford, NBCR board president. “We want to be here for people like Jennifer to help them through the emotional distress, as well as the physical toll of the disease and side effects of treatment.”

Bates, like so many of the survivors receiving services, agrees with Crawford’s insight.

“I am convinced NBCR has been crucial for my healing, not only physically but also emotionally,” she said.

Since 2020, NBCR has provided hundreds of sessions of healing therapies and supportive services that go hand in hand with conventional treatments through a network of experienced practitioners who have been vetted through a cancer-focused application process.

These services include oncology massage, acupuncture, yoga therapy, guided imagery, Reiki, health coaching and nutrition counseling. Research has shown that these practices, known as “complementary therapies,” can help with the fatigue, anxiety, pain and nausea that are often associated with cancer and treatment, as well as enhance recovery and survivorship.

NBCR has also offered more than 45 free “Speaker Series” sessions on Zoom on a variety of topics of interest to people living with cancer, presented by knowledgeable, experienced and



COURTESY PHOTO

**Jennifer Bates and her “loyal trail companion,” Auggie, explore the mountains in Colorado. “My family and nature have been an integral part of my healing journey,” she said.**

passionate speakers.

The most recent Speaker Series session, “Moving Forward With Self-Compassion: Using Cancer as a Catalyst,” featured breast cancer survivor Robin Bavaro, a health and wellness nurse coach, founder of Holistic Health Communications, and NBCR advisory board member.

Other topics have included “Navigating Cancer With Courage,” meditation, chair yoga, healthy eating, mindfulness, journaling for health, acupressure, “Ask the Nurses,” managing fatigue, essential oils, nontoxic living and expressive arts.

“Our goal is to share empowering information and practices that people can incorporate for their well-being and healing in the long term,” Crawford said. “Cancer treatment can be grueling. However, the period after completion of treatment is also a very vulnerable time, as well as an opportunity to bring body, mind and spirit back into harmony. Our experience is that our self-care topics help people move forward in a powerful way.”

NBCR also maintains an online guide that is a comprehensive directory of cancer-specific programs, supportive services, organizations and resources available to the people living with cancer in

the communities north of Boston.

Since its inception in 2016, NBCR has worked closely with local cancer centers, including the Beverly Hospital Cancer Center at Anna Jaques and other Beth Israel Lahey Health cancer centers, to ensure that patients are informed about and have access to these important services while undergoing treatment and after.

Dr. Colleen Yavarow, an oncologist who joined the board of NBCR while practicing at the Anna Jaques cancer center, has personally witnessed the value of what the resource offers.

“Most patients can’t afford beneficial services such as oncology massage and acupuncture, which are typically not covered by insurance,” she said. “NBCR has been instrumental in funding and guiding patients to receive these important therapies at no cost.

“As an oncologist, I see the ongoing benefits of this support. When patients more effectively complete chemotherapy, they have better symptom management and improved overall well-being,” Yavarow said. “I can’t thank NBCR enough for these gifts, which have vastly enhanced and improved the quality of life for patients and their families.”

Bates’ journey reflects the positive impact of NBCR’s mission to

### Did you know?

A 2024 report from the International Agency for Research on Cancer indicated that 71% of new cases of breast cancer across the globe were diagnosed in individuals age 50 and older.

Though age is a known risk factor for various types of cancer, it’s important that women recognize a significant percentage of breast cancer diagnoses in many parts of the world are made in women younger than 50.

For example, nearly 1 in 5 breast cancer diagnoses in both North America (18%) and Europe (19%) are made in women younger than 50, while almost half of all breast cancers in Africa (47%) are diagnosed in women who have not yet reached their 50th birthdays.

Though such figures are affected by a number of variables, including the accessibility of screening procedures like mammograms, they speak to the reality that breast cancer can affect women at any age, a notion that underscores the significance of screening and the need to support efforts to make it more accessible in every corner of the globe.

help people live stronger, healthier and more fulfilling lives after cancer.

“Cancer ended up being a vehicle of change for me that has completely changed the trajectory of my life, all for the better,” said Bates, whose journey led her to found The Centered Scholar, “a coaching practice that integrates mindfulness with neuroscience to help teens understand their developing brains, cultivate awareness and strengthen resilience.”

“I am profoundly grateful for NBCR and their unwavering commitment to helping people like me,” she said. “This ever-growing community continues to support so many of us with kindness, resources and hope. To anyone navigating this path or standing by a loved one through it, I hope you find support, compassion and healing as I did.”

For more information about what resources are available to you or to support the work of NBCR, go to [nbcancerresource.org](http://nbcancerresource.org) or reach out by email to [info@nbcancerresource.org](mailto:info@nbcancerresource.org).





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# Giving the boot to cancer

## Realtor Lillian Montalto, a 15-year survivor, fights back with fun-themed fundraisers

By Stacey Marcus

» Correspondent

Andover resident Lillian Montalto knows a thing or two about being a leader.

A real estate professional with more than four decades of experience and 25 years at the helm of Lillian Montalto Signature Properties International, Montalto has closed over \$3 billion worth of real estate and been recognized by the National Association of Realtors as America's top female real estate agent.

Today, she is not only the principal of her company, but she is also spearheading an annual fundraiser to raise awareness of breast cancer and reminding people to get their mammograms, all because of an appointment she requested 16 years ago.

In 2009, she went for a bone density scan. When she was checking out of her appointment, she realized that she had not had a mammogram in a couple of years. She asked if she could make an appointment.

After she went for the mammogram, she got a call and was asked to return the next day, when she was immediately referred to a

breast cancer surgeon.

Montalto was diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer, which has fewer treatment options. Post surgery, she had several months of chemotherapy, followed by radiation two times a day for a month.

She elected to have her treatment at Elliot Hospital in Manchester, New Hampshire.

"I loved my breast surgeon and wanted to stay in her community of care. It was better than going into Boston," she said, praising the team members at Elliot Breast Health Center for their compassion and professionalism.

She finished her treatment the week before Christmas. Ever since, for the past 15 years, she has been on a campaign to trumpet the message of the importance of regular mammograms.

Positivity and privacy were key elements of Montalto's recovery.

"I went to work every single day and got dressed up for chemotherapy and infusions," she said.

She notes that everyone's journey is different, but for her personality, it was important to keep moving forward with positive energy, privacy and purpose.



COURTESY PHOTOS

**Breast cancer survivor Lillian Montalto, left, and Nicole Antonopoulos share a toast at "Paint the Roses Pink," the fifth annual breast cancer benefit hosted by Lillian Montalto Signature Properties International in October 2024.**

For the past five years, she has spearheaded a fundraiser that has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for organizations like the Ellie Fund, New Hampshire Breast Cancer Coalition and American Cancer Society.

On Saturday, Oct. 4, Lillian Montalto Signature Properties International hosted its sixth annual breast cancer benefit, a Dolly Parton-inspired event called "Lillywood" that featured a fashion show, food and drinks, an auction, raffles, local vendors, music, and more.

Past themes for the parties, held on the roof of the Park Street real estate firm, have included "Paint the Roses Pink: A Wonderland

Tea Party" and "Fight Like a Barbie."

Money raised this year benefits the Miss Pink Organization, helping provide essential support and funds for breast cancer patients and their families to cover the cost of medical bills and basic necessities during times of treatment.

Her message to people going through treatment is that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

It has remained important for Montalto to be proactive in the fight, first for herself and now for others.

"We're going to give cancer the cowboy boot," she said with a smile. "Helping others can help you get through it."



**Montalto and her husband, Bob Bohlen, pose at the 2023 fundraiser, "Fight Like a Barbie."**

## Celebrate community and support breast cancer education

A vibrant evening of dancing, connection and celebration will benefit the Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition.

The 28th annual Lesbian & Friends LGBTQIA+ Dance is set for Saturday, Oct. 25, at Club Café in Boston. This year's theme is "Halloween Bash for a Cause: Celebrating Community,

Supporting Prevention."

The evening will kick off with a VIP Party from 6 to 8 p.m. The coalition will honor E. Denise Simmons, longtime Cambridge mayor and the first Black openly lesbian mayor in the U.S., for her trailblazing leadership and community service. The party will also feature a dance lesson by

Liz Nania of OUT to Dance, hors d'oeuvres and early access to all of the night's festivities, which will include music by DJ Christina from San Francisco, drag performances, a costume contest and more.

VIP tickets are \$40 in advance and \$45 at the door. General admission, from 8 to 11 p.m., is

\$20. All guests must be at least 21.

Money raised by the event support MBCC's mission to prevent environmental causes of breast cancer through community education, research advocacy and changes to public policy.

In 1991, a group of lesbians founded MBCC with a unique goal of focusing on the preventable

causes of breast cancer. Since then, MBCC has been instrumental in numerous advances locally and nationally, beginning with efforts that led Massachusetts to become the first state in the nation to officially recognize breast cancer as an epidemic.

For tickets and more information, visit [mbcc.org/dance](http://mbcc.org/dance).



# Encore helps survivors move, heal and thrive

By Matt Petry

» mpetry@northofboston.com

Since it began in 2009, the Encore program at YWCA Greater Newburyport has been offering healing and community to those who have gone through breast cancer.

“The Encore program is a free program for those who have experienced cancer at any point in their lives,” said Ilene Harnch-Grady, health and wellness and Encore director at the Y.

“So initially, when the Encore program started, it was just for breast cancer and more like womanly cancers. Now, it’s for all cancer, but the majority of people who attend are breast cancer survivors.”

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. One in 8 women in the United States will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime. In 2025, an estimated 316,950 women and 2,800 men will be diagnosed with invasive breast cancer, and an additional 59,080 new cases of noninvasive breast cancer will be diagnosed,



STAFF FILE PHOTO

**Participants in the Encore program perform arm exercises in the warm-water pool at YWCA Greater Newburyport.**

according to the National Breast Cancer Foundation.

During and after treatment, many patients experience side effects like numbness and sensory loss, mobility issues, fatigue, weakness, and general physical and psychological discomfort.

Encore is designed to address these challenges with low-intensity, therapeutic exercises and relaxation techniques.

“It includes gentle land and water classes that are specifically geared toward people who have been through surgery and

treatment, with a strong focus on functional movements, range of motion and easy access to exercise that feels accessible to everyone,” said Harnch-Grady, who has been running the program since its inception.

She said that they also have featured speakers who will come to address the group from time to time. Participants also have access to ongoing peer support groups, including the ones held monthly at the Tough Warrior Princesses headquarters in Amesbury.

“In addition to being a program that’s full of exercise, it’s also a very social program,” Harnch-Grady said. “It’s resulted in many long-term friendships and a strong sense of community amongst the women who have participated.”

She said that it can have huge benefits for those who participate. After the initial 12-week session, which is free, people can choose to continue with After Encore.

“I think the impacts are really quite amazing,” Harnch-Grady said. “Many of the women who started with us back in 2009 are

still with us.

“A lot of these women were, pre-diagnosis, not necessarily active people who actively engaged in healthy exercise,” she said.

“And now the program has given them the incentive and the means to access a program that they feel really comfortable with.”

She estimates that hundreds of cancer survivors have joined the program in the past 16 years.

“There’s a ton of people. There’s a ton of referrals in this program,” she said. “I mean, honestly, we’ve probably had close to 800 women start.”

One of the long-term benefits of joining is building good, active habits to stay healthy.

“Because one thing we do know is that a good body weight and being physically active does deter recurrence with certain types of breast cancer,” Harnch-Grady said. “That much, we do know. That is an evidence-based statement.”

For more information on the program and how to enroll, visit [ywcanewburyport.org/ywca-encore](http://ywcanewburyport.org/ywca-encore).

## Ways you can support a loved one with breast cancer

Someone is diagnosed with breast cancer every day. According to the World Health Organization, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among women around the world, as well as a leading cause of cancer death.

Unfortunately, roughly half of all breast cancers occur in women with no specific identifiable risk factors beyond age and sex, so there may be no warning signs that a cancer diagnosis is coming.

Chances are a newly diagnosed breast cancer patient will need some measure of help and support but may not feel comfortable asking for assistance. Getting help also can be overwhelming for certain individuals. But supportive friends or loved ones can step up to the plate and offer support in various ways.

### Provide meals

Take turns with other friends

and family members to prepare and deliver meals. If you don’t cook, arrange to have takeout delivered.

### Go grocery shopping

Help stock the refrigerator with plenty of healthy and convenient foods. While the person battling cancer may experience various degrees of hunger, keeping food available helps other members of the household.

### Straighten up

Take care of cleaning around the house. You may wash some loads of laundry, vacuum and iron clothes. If budget allows, you can hire a cleaning service to come in once or twice a month for a deep cleaning.

### Care for the dog

If fatigue makes it challenging for the person battling cancer to take the dog on walks, you can



step up and handle dog walking or trips to a dog park.

### Provide caregivers a break

The primary caregiver will be working overtime to offer support, and you can give that person a much-needed break. Step in to go to doctors’ appointments or watch

a young child so the caregiver gets a day or two off.

### Pay bills

Household tasks may seem overwhelming, so you can help manage the finances by paying bills or sorting through mail. If medical paperwork has begun to

stack up, you also can organize and sort items of importance.

### Take on chauffeur duty

Take on the task of driving the patient to and from checkups or scans. A friendly face can make a big difference in taming anxiety.

### Make home more comfy

Transform any living spaces, whether they are home or temporary apartments or hotels, with creature comforts. This can include high-thread-count sheets, newly framed family photos, comfortable pillows and blankets, and more.

### Sit and listen

Sometimes the greatest comfort can be sitting with and listening to the person who is fighting cancer. Don’t offer advice or recommendations unless prompted, but listen to any concerns and offer time and support.



# Brewing a new chapter

For Allyson Irish, going through cancer treatment was a transformative journey

By Stacey Marcus

» Correspondent

When Allyson Irish received a breast cancer diagnosis in 2021, it came as a complete surprise. Breast cancer does not run in her family, though her maternal aunt was diagnosed 30 years ago.

“I didn’t know many women with breast cancer,” said Irish, who notes that 1 in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer.

Being the one of the 1 in 8 propelled the Andover resident to embark on a new path full of challenges and self-discovery.

Irish first noticed something in her chest area when she was getting ready one morning. She had an upcoming mammogram and figured she would go to her primary care physician after.

The first indication that something was going on was when she was told that she should do a follow-up immediately, as it seemed pretty certain that it was breast cancer.

She recalls feeling bewildered after hearing the news. It was only a year after the COVID-19 pandemic started, and she was scheduled for her second



Allyson Irish relaxes outside her Andover home.

REBA SALDANHA PHOTO

vaccine shot in Brockton. She started to shake when her husband picked her up. They barely talked during the 45-minute ride.

When the mammogram results came back, her fear was confirmed. She was

diagnosed with stage 1 ductal carcinoma, a type of breast cancer that originates in the milk ducts. The doctor was very optimistic because it was detected at an early stage, but Irish was still scared.

“You are thrown into a world you never expected,” she said.

Irish remembers that it was a difficult spring.

“It is very challenging to tell people, as every time you tell someone else, you

## Healing insights

Allyson Irish shares a few tips for people who are going through cancer treatment:

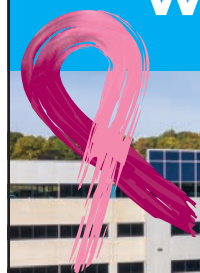
► **Take the help.** So many people offer to do acts of kindness like cooking and cleaning. She says to take what they offer without guilt. People really want to help out.

► **Allow yourself to feel.** Irish had to compartmentalize to get through treatment, but she now realizes that she was sad, angry and confused and it would have benefited her to ask for help.

► **Be gentle with yourself.** Every person’s diagnosis is different. Before, she thought there was just one path. There are so many treatment options. A lot is going to happen. You will look different. You will feel different. You will have a new perspective on life.

relieve shock and sadness,” she said.

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## Did you know?

Thanks to early detection and improved therapies, many cases of breast cancer are successfully treated. However, the Susan G. Komen organization reports that breast cancer survival rates vary depending on the stage of the disease at the time of diagnosis.

Those diagnosed as having stages 0, 1 and 2 tend to have better survival rates than those whose disease was discovered after the

cancer had already advanced to stages 3 and 4.

Although each situation is unique, the five-year survival rate among those diagnosed with breast cancer stage 1 or lower is between 98% and 100%. Stage 2 falls between 90% and 99%. The five-year survival rate for stage 3 patients is between 66% and 98%.

While the organization does not provide survival

data for stage 4, according to the National Cancer Institute's Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results, the five-year relative breast cancer survival rates for women with a SEER stage of distant (the cancer cells have spread to other parts of the body) is 33%. If cancer cells have spread beyond the breast, but it is limited to nearby lymph nodes (regional), the survival rate is 87%.

She recalls having dinner with a couple of college friends, who both started crying when she told them the news.

"Every time you tell people re-traumatizes you," Irish said.

The doctors recommended surgery to have the tumor removed. HER2-positive, estrogen-related cancers like hers can be more aggressive, so they recommended three months of chemotherapy in July followed by radiation in

the fall.

Irish completed her treatment by the end of 2021. In the spring of 2022, no cancer was detected.

"Everyone has a different journey," said Irish, who notes that for her to get through the treatment, she had to compartmentalize.

She concentrated on the physical aspects and tried to limit the emotional elements.

"If I focused on my feelings, I could not get through

the physical," she said.

When she took a pause, she had time to reflect and recalibrate.

In spring 2022, Irish went on a work trip to California and took an extra day to bop around San Francisco and visit Muir Woods.

Amid the redwoods, she got very emotional. Walking among the trees, she felt grateful.

Shortly after that, she took a trip to London. While there, she and her son,



COURTESY PHOTO

**Allyson Irish and her son, Devin Wilson, attend high tea at The Rubens at the Palace in London in April 2022.**

Devin Wilson, went to high tea at The Rubens at the Palace, a hotel across the street from Buckingham Palace. Irish was so enchanted with the experience that she decided to learn more about tea and attend more high teas.

"I had a 'teapiphany,'" she said.

She became a certified tea sommelier and launched a business called Teally that creates custom tea experiences and tastings for organizations, businesses and home tea enthusiasts.

"I've had an evolution in my thinking and a greater openness to life in general," Irish said.

She became acutely aware of how fragile life is and how health is such a blessing, prompting her to ask herself questions like: What do I enjoy? What have I held myself back from trying? What am I good at?

"I am more deliberate about the things I spend time on," Irish said. "I am confident with my choices. Not everyone is going to like it as I embark on new phases. I realize now that many of the things I thought I could not do, I was the one telling myself that."

Before cancer, Irish notes that she was racing through life. Today, she is more deliberate.

"I enjoy things more, not just the big things like trips, but the everyday stuff like watching the birds at the bird feeder or enjoying a good cup of coffee or tea," she said. "I am much more generous with myself."

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