

'After the Storm' documents struggles, triumphs of cancer patients

By Hannah Vahl
ShoreView Staff

The calm demeanor of Guilford resident Melissa Burns belies the extremity of her experience with breast cancer, an experience she compares to a tornado, running through her life and ravaging it.

About two years ago, in December, Burns, who was expecting her second child, was in the shower soaping up. "I felt the lump," she said. "But I didn't think much of it because of the usual things in pregnancy."

She mentioned it the next time she visited her obstetrician. Then, she underwent a series of tests. "Even through those appointments, I didn't think it was anything," she said. The results came back two weeks before Christmas. She was 19 weeks pregnant, and 32 years old.

Burns is one of a community of young survivors in the area — young women who have had to deal not only with their own health, but with seeing their young families through the crisis. Unfortunately, people are getting diagnosed younger. And for that group, she says, succumbing is not an option. "We have no choice," she said. "Because we are young and have our whole lives ahead of us."

She's provided that population a support group, called In the Pink, which is designed especially for diagnosed women under 50. And now their stories, and how their lives change after their diagnosis, are the subject of a documentary that she and Madison songwriter Jill Nesi are producing, called "After the Storm."

It was that much harder to go through treatments, in her case, four rounds of chemotherapy before giving birth, and four afterward, as a young mother, with another child on the way.

"You can't just curl up in a fetal position in your bed like you want to," she explained. "You have to stay strong, and keep a brave face on for your children."

That brave face wasn't just for her kids. She began to speak publicly, doing public service announcements and giving the keynote address for the Terri Brodeur walk this year. The



Photo by Dennis Bell

Melissa Burns, left, and Jill Nesi, right, are the creative team behind an upcoming documentary on young women diagnosed with breast cancer who, after undergoing treatments, work to rebuild their lives. Local businesses and groups have already starting raising money for the pair's project.

marathon-length fund-raising walk was where she and Nesi met.

Burns noticed that there weren't a lot of people her age that she could call to talk about her experiences. She wanted to find those younger peers. Between her doctors at Yale and her plastic surgeon in town, she began to get the names of other women in the area like her. And soon women were calling her on a weekly basis to seek advice, compare experiences. And just to know that they were not alone.

"It got to the point where I wanted to start a group," she said. But she didn't want to start just any support group. She had attended groups before, where she was the youngest woman in the room. The atmosphere would be gloomy, almost like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

"I wanted something different," said Burns. "I wanted it to be more modern."

She envisioned meetings in a home, with a bottle of wine and appetizers, a sort of girls' night out. "It's women getting together and doing what we do best, which is gabbing," joked Burns. And the gabbing was not required to be about cancer at all.

The group now numbers 45, and continues to grow. Their next meeting, on June 12, will be for couples, since the women have found that their husbands are also in need of support and peers to talk to. Marc Silver, author of "Breast Cancer Husband," will come up from Maryland to speak to the group.

Nesi became an activist after she found a lump in her breast. Though it turned out not to be breast cancer, the experience was formative.

"Just the fear of it," she said. "What do you actually do if you get the bad news? Whom do you call? Where do you go?" After meeting Burns, and going to one of In the Pink's meetings, she had her answer. "I now know there's a place I can go to be helped."

It is from the lives of this unique group of women that the upcoming documentary will draw.

"Of all the angles we could take, this was the one we felt didn't get the most attention," explained Burns. "It's the mixed blessings that we wanted to portray."

"When your hair starts growing back and you are seen around town again, everyone thinks that you are cured," says Burns. "Nothing could be further from the truth. Your family has just been through this tornado, Your kids are still reeling with fear and anxiety."

Added to that are the medical oddities resulting from treatment. Burns couldn't open sippy cups for her two children because of numbness in her fingertips. Called peripheral neuropathy, it is a side effect of chemotherapy drugs.

Then there's chemo brain, where people who have undergone chemotherapy have bad recall. "I'm the queen of interruption, because if I don't, I will forget (my thought)," said Burns. "It's funny, but it's also frustrating and scary."

Yale professors belong to Burns' support group, and they fear that chemo brain will affect their jobs.

And there's the gripping fear of reoccurrence.

Burns had thought that after being diagnosed, she could catch any reoccurrence early, since she still goes to the doctor every three months. Then one day she realized that this seeming safety net was not as secure as she thought.

"So I broke down," she said. "I was in tears. I thought that because I went through all of this, I would be okay."

"Once that falls out from underneath you, the real healing begins," she added.

Nesi, a musician who writes children's songs, was so moved by the experience and the women she met at the Terri Brodeur fund-raising walk that she decided to write a song about it. When she ran into Burns at the gym, she asked her to help with the last lyrics. Burns sent her an e-mail with some suggestions, and their friendship was born. From songwriting, they dreamed bigger. The documentary was the brainchild of Nesi. All she had to do was tell Burns, she said. "And that was it."

The two decided to finance the film through grassroots community fund raising. They knew they could raise awareness along the road toward the making of the film, and give community members buy-in to a product they could then screen in the community. And the money was going to a tangible cause that donors could see for themselves.

The first real event wasn't supposed to take place until June 1, but people have been approaching the two women with fund-raising ideas already, and events are already underway to support the project. The response, they say, has been overwhelming.

They now think that they will raise even more than the film will cost to produce, and will donate that extra money back to the Terri Brodeur Breast Cancer Foundation.

"They are not just [donating] because they believe in us and care about us," said Burns. "Almost all of us have been touched by cancer."

For more information about the documentary "Life after the Storm," or the support group In the Pink, visit the website www.lifeafterstorm.com, or call Jill Nesi at 203-208-0956.

Fund raiser to benefit 'Life After the Storm'

The next event to support the documentary "Life After the Storm" is happening May 17 from 12 to 5 p.m. at the Shops at Water's Edge, where their annual Spring Fling, which benefits a different charity each year, will support the documentary with a portion of proceeds from sales at the eight stores. There will be free products from Enhance Med Spa, to restore health and beauty to the skin.

A trunk show will take place at Bellwether featuring the whole line from Vera Bradley, the company known for its brightly patterned cotton handbags and line of soft luggage, with select patterns 20 to 40 percent off.

Southern Exposure, which sells handmade arts and crafts by indigenous peoples of the United States and other places, including Mexico, will host a belated Cinco de Mayo celebration, which commemorates the ousting of French forces from the Puebla region of Mexico in 1862, with Mexican music, traditional cookies, and of course salsa. Owners Lu and Les Lupovich started the store with an interest in native culture and art, and hope to share that culture with customers for Spring Fling.

Azul will host a fashion show with the season's hottest trends from their favorite West Coast designers at 1 p.m.

Michele A Bridal Boutique will host a trunk show by Winnie Couture and offer modeling of the collection throughout the day.

One of Connecticut's oldest jewelry businesses, Bernie Fields, will be hosting its popular make your own jewelry workshop with one of their in house designers, Christina Menzeo, free of charge. Kids will select from different stones, beads, and wires to make their own bracelet or necklace to take home. For the young ones who prefer to be entertained, a balloon artist and a magician will be on hand for diversion. And for adults as well as kids, the Shiny Lapel Trio — actually a musical group of four — will give the event some swing, with fresh twists on jazz standards mixed in with rockabilly. Stalwarts of the Tuesday evening slot at the Griswold Inn, they will bring a cool retro soundtrack to the festivities from 2 to 4 p.m. Should hunger strike you, indulge in free ice cream that will be given out courtesy of Sugarplum's Sweets of Saybrook.

Spring Fling will take place Saturday May 17 from 12 to 5 p.m. on Route 1 in front of Water's Edge, 1587 Boston Post Road, Exit 65 off I-95.

Movies

Movies are listed from May 9 through Thursday, May 15. Call Theater for last minute changes.

MADISON ART CINEMAS
761 Boston Post Road, Madison
203-245-3456

"The Visitor" PG-13 Friday, Saturday, 1:45 p.m., 4:30 p.m., 7:25 p.m., 9:30 p.m.; Sunday, Wednesday, 1:45 p.m., 4:30 p.m., 7:30 p.m.; Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, 7:30 p.m.

"Young @ Heart" PG-13 Friday, Saturday, 1:30 p.m., 4:15 p.m., 7:15 p.m., 9:30 p.m.; Sunday, Wednesday, 1:30 p.m., 4:15 p.m., 7:30 p.m.; Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, 7:30 p.m.

MARQUEE CINEMAS
Flatrock Place, Westbrook
860-399-9692

"Speed Racer" PG Saturday, Sunday, 12:15 p.m., 12:45 p.m., 3:15 p.m., 3:45 p.m., 6:15 p.m., 6:45 p.m., 9:15 p.m., 9:45 p.m.; Weekdays, 3:15 p.m., 3:45 p.m., 6:15 p.m., 6:45 p.m., 9:15 p.m., 9:45 p.m.

"What Happens in Vegas" PG-13 Saturday, Sunday, 11:30 a.m., noon, 2 p.m., 2:30 p.m., 4:30 p.m., 5 p.m., 7 p.m., 7:30 p.m., 9:25 p.m., 9:55 p.m.; Weekdays, 4:30 p.m., 5 p.m., 7 p.m., 7:30 p.m., 9:25 p.m., 9:55 p.m.

"Iron Man" PG-13 Saturday, Sunday, 11:30 a.m., 12:15 p.m., 1 p.m., 2:30 p.m., 3:15 p.m., 4 p.m., 5:30 p.m., 6:30 p.m., 7 p.m., 8:30 p.m., 9:30 p.m., 10 p.m.; Weekdays, 3:15 p.m., 4 p.m., 5:30 p.m., 6:30 p.m., 7 p.m., 8:30 p.m., 9:30 p.m., 10 p.m.

"Made of Honor" PG-13 Saturday, Sunday, 11:45 a.m., 2:20 p.m., 4:50 p.m., 7:20 p.m., 9:50 p.m.; Weekdays, 4:50 p.m., 7:20 p.m., 9:50 p.m.

"Baby Mama" PG-13 Saturday, Sunday, noon, 2:30 p.m., 4:50 p.m., 7:15 p.m., 9:40 p.m.; Weekdays, 4:50 p.m., 7:15 p.m., 9:40 p.m.

"Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay" R Daily, 9:20 p.m.

"Forgetting Sarah Marshall" R Daily, 6:50 p.m., 9:30 p.m.

"Prom Night" PG-13 Saturday, Sunday, 1:10 p.m., 9:30 p.m.; Weekdays, 9:30 p.m.

"Nim's Island" PG Saturday, Sunday, noon, 2:20 p.m., 4:40 p.m., 7 p.m.; Weekdays, 4:40 p.m., 7 p.m.

"21" PG-13 Daily, 3:50 p.m., 6:40 p.m.

"Horton Hears a Who" G Saturday, Sunday, 12:15 p.m., 2:30 p.m., 4:40 p.m.; Weekdays, 4:40 p.m.

Kidtoons: "Sesame Street Dinosaurs" G Saturday, Sunday, 11:30 a.m.

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