

WEYMOUTH NEWS

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 19, 2009

Hope in Bloom fights cancer with healing power of gardens

By Maureen Walsh
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Joanne Hopkinson and Jean O'Halloran have shared things no mother and daughter ever should: the same form of breast cancer, surgeons, an oncology team and overlapping chemotherapy appointments.

Now they are sharing another form of treatment: the healing power of gardens planted by Hope in Bloom for Massachusetts breast cancer patients.

When Hopkinson was diagnosed in September 2007, she was already coping with the cancer death of her friend and gardening buddy, Pat Kramer of Weymouth, her daughter said.

"I wanted her to have a garden to relieve her stress, to have something to tend to and look forward to seeing," said O'Halloran. "I thought this was the perfect way to thank her for all her help to me and to heal her after the loss of her friend."

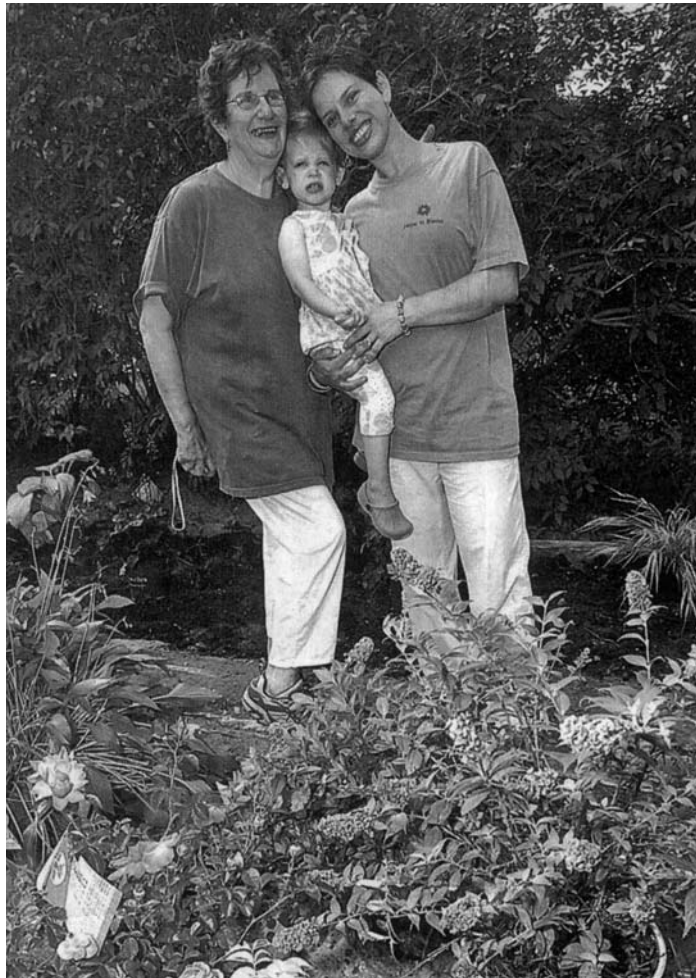
"She contacted Hope in Bloom, but before the new garden could be installed, she herself was diagnosed in August 2008 with Stage 2 invasive ductal carcinoma, the same form of breast cancer as her mother.

"They asked me if I wanted a garden, too," O'Halloran said.

Since 2007, Hope in Bloom has installed more than 70 indoor, patio container and inground gardens and has requests for more than 100 more.

This month, volunteers created a small vegetable garden in O'Halloran's yard in Cohasset and completely replanted a 200 square-yard garden strip at Hopkinson's Weymouth home.

"Gardens provide their own brand of medicine that doctors can't offer," said Roberta Dehman Hershon, who founded Hope in Bloom in honor of her friend and gardening buddy Beverly Eisenberg, who died of breast cancer at the age of 55.



Joanne Hopkinson and her daughter Jean O'Halloran, holding Abby O'Halloran, pose in their Hope in Bloom garden on Summer Street.

"Gardens lower your blood pressure, increase serotonin levels, reduce anxiety and stress, and they provide beneficial exercise for people who are able to do some work."

"The combined effect," she said, "is that patients are more receptive to medical intervention, and it helps them as they go through treatment."

Inner peace

Hopkinson, 66, considers herself a "basic gardener" who has

always enjoyed tending the plants and flowers she can see from her back yard deck.

"I tried to keep up with it, but I missed a whole year" because of cancer treatments, she said. "I almost gave up. I was feeling sorry for the garden."

Her new garden was designed by Chris Kennedy, a certified horticulturist and owner of Kenedy's Country Gardens in Scituate. He donated 50 new plants, compost and mulch and spent a day with six

Hope in Bloom volunteers, uprooting a scraggly old hedge and planting the new garden.

In addition to flowering shrubs, perennials and annuals, Kennedy also planted a small plot of kitchen herbs for Hopkinson to use in cooking the Italian dishes she loves.

"It's overwhelming. I think it will show its beauty even more as its growing," she said. "Its made me excited and happy to have that interest to have that inner peace, peace of mind."

O'Halloran, 33, said Hope in Bloom gave her the chance to "jump start her dream of growing vegetables for herself, her husband Brian and their children: Sean, 4, and Abby, 21 months.

"I chose a vegetable garden, because I wanted something small to tend. It gives me peace of mind to know where the food I feed my family is coming from," she said. "I try to buy local produce, and you can't get more local than your back yard."

The garden planted by Kennedy and the Hope in Bloom volunteers includes herbs, tomatoes and sweet red peppers, jalapeño peppers and watermelon.

"Sean picked the first tomato yesterday and he helps with the watering every day," O'Halloran said. "He says, 'Let's make rainbows.'"

"We have two watermelons growing. I've used the herbs in sauce, and my husband loves his chili peppers."

"Every day Abby says, 'Go see garden!'"

O'Halloran, a freelance book editor, is a 1993 graduate of Weymouth High School and former member of the Youth Group team at Old South Union Church. Her husband Brian is a 1989 graduate of Weymouth High School South.

'Enjoy the moment'

Hopkinson's new flower garden has allowed her to continue a tradition of keeping a fresh bloom by the photo of an infant daughter, Christine, who died of heart problems when she was nine months old.

"I went out yesterday morning and cut the first rose I saw," she said. "I put it in the living room in front of my daughter's picture to remember her."

She and her husband Fred, a retired accountant, are also the parents of Jim, 40, and Paul, 30, whose wife Christine is expecting the couple's first baby.

Hopkinson and O'Halloran have completed initial treatment of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. There is no known genetic factor in both developing the same form of breast cancer, O'Halloran said.

"I've seen my mom handle this with grace, dignity and a fair amount of energy," she said. "I look at the way she's handled it and think, It's going to be okay. I can do it."

"I knew it was something I had to do, that I couldn't change," said Hopkinson. "I had a lot of help from my family, friends, neighbors, my husband and children."

"I think you need faith or something to believe in to get through it."

Hopkinson, a certified home health aide and nursing assistant, has returned to part-time work with her husband providing home care.

She likes to start her day slowly with breakfast and coffee and a peek at her garden from the deck, she said.

"I've learned with cancer that I want time just to enjoy the moment."

'My angels'

Mother and daughter said they were overwhelmed by the generosity of Kennedy, Hershon and the Hope in Bloom volunteers.

"You don't know where they came from. That's why I refer to them as my angels," said Hopkinson. "They're there to give a helping hand to people when they least expect it."

Kennedy's Country Gardens has donated seven gardens through Hope in Bloom from patio containers to complete yard makeovers.

This is a good opportunity to donate more than a \$50 gift certificate. I'm able to give my time and expertise, which is more valuable," said Chris Kennedy.

"To spend the day at someone's house makes me feel better. I brighten someone's day, and give them something to look forward to."

"What we're doing here is to help people already dealing with



Hope in Bloom volunteers Ginny Wilson-Canney, Michele Tasiopoulos, Dianne Walsh, Roberta Hershon, Erica Greenberg, and Karen Vieira.

cancer, but in the long haul we've got to learn how to prevent it," said Kennedy, whose mother Linda died of lung cancer five years ago.

"I don't know what role chemicals play, but I don't want to perpetuate that pattern."

Kennedy said he uses organic compost and materials and tries to mix plants by such factors as color, texture, height and blooming season, the new owner's preferences and ease of maintaining the garden.

"Usually the spot speaks to us," he said.

"I know I appreciate pretty flowers," said volunteer Michele Tasiopoulos of Norwell, who helped plant both O'Halloran's and Hopkinson's gardens.

"I know a woman with cancer who gardens a lot. I know how important it is, for her to just sit in her garden after chemo and radiation."

Volunteer Karen Vieira of Marshfield said, "I come from a family of gardeners. Gardening through our joys and sorrows helps us get through life. It's a nice creative outlet, very therapeutic."

"If you nurture the garden, it gives back to you. It nurtures your soul," said volunteer Ginny Wilson-Canney of Hingham.

"Time is something I have, one thing I can offer. Women should support women anyway, but cancer affects us all."

Another mother and daughter, Gerrie and Erica Greenberg of Sharon, helped plant both gardens and have been Hope in Bloom

volunteers almost from the beginning, said Roberta Dehman Hershon.

Erica, now 16, has recruited other student photographers at Sharon High School to make photo note cards of gardens, landscapes and animals to benefit Hope in Bloom. The cards are available online at www.hopeinbloom.org.

'A joyous place'

Hope in Bloom's first garden was planted on July 11, 2007, the day Lady Bird Johnson passed away. Hershon said she took the name of her new organization from a quote by the former First Lady: "Where flowers bloom so does hope."

Two years and more than 70 gardens later, she said, "People have been overwhelmed. It's something they never think of doing for themselves."

"It transforms someone's yard and makes it a joyous place. They're amazed at the difference it makes."

"When your yard looks good, that feeling translates to you."

Hope in Bloom provides gardens free to both men and women in treatment for breast cancer and tries to install as many gardens as possible according to the season and the funds available.

The cost of Hope in Bloom gardens ranges from \$200 to \$400 for indoor plant stands, \$800 to \$1,500 for frost-free zinc patio containers, and \$1,000 to \$3,000 for in-ground gardens with benches,

stepping stones, stone walls and other focal points.

A few nurseries like Kennedy's Country Gardens have donated entire gardens, while others provide plants and materials at reduced or no cost, she said. Neptune's Harvest has donated organic fertilizer while Daniel's Plant Food has supplied plant food. Corona Clipper just shipped 30 new pruners to the group.

"We have 650 people in our database of volunteers. All we need is cash," she said.

Hope in Bloom is a 501(c)3 charity. Tax-deductible donations made be made online at www.hopeinbloom.org or by mail to 202 Bussey Street; Dedham, MA 02026-2512.

See the website for information on upcoming fundraisers, including a 20-percent-off shopping day at Lord & Taylor on October 6 (includes cosmetics) and a musical revue at Framingham High School on November 8.

Hershon has some advice for anyone who wants to do something for someone who is sick:

"Don't ask. Do whatever feels right. Make dinner, pick up the dry cleaning, be a designated driver, get the kids at school, anything."

It's so easy to improve someone's life."