

BREAST CANCER SUPPORT

A Healing Community

Being around other women by joining a support group at the Steeplechase Cancer Center at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJ Somerset) helped Rita Coco and Bonnie Girvan heal beyond the traditional scars left by medicine and surgery.

Shown: Rita Coco (left) and Bonnie Girvan recently took a trip to Pleasant Valley Lavender Farm in Morganville, one of many outings they've had since developing a friendship at one of the women's cancer support groups at the Steeplechase Cancer Center at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Somerset. Although both women were treated years ago for breast cancer, they continue to heal by taking advantage of the comprehensive calendar of support programs offered at the Center.

The group helped to address the emotional wounds that lingered as a result of facing a life changing battle with breast cancer. Once strangers, the women are now close friends, thanks to a bond they've developed since becoming members of the Steeplechase Cancer Center at RWJ Somerset's support group community. The women, who met at Wellness Workout which is one of the many programs offered, found they were able to talk with and get support from other women with breast cancer. "Being in a room with other women going through the same thing made me feel better," said Ms. Girvan, who had moved from Vermont to Bound Brook shortly before she was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 59. Ms. Girvan began attending the support group during her treatment at RWJ Somerset for aggressive HER2-positive breast cancer, which included removal of both breasts (double mastectomy) and breast reconstruction.

Ms. Coco, who was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 55, did not think that she needed the help of a support group until she finished treatment at RWJ Somerset for her Stage 3A estrogen-positive breast cancer: removal of her right breast, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. "When everything was over, I was kind of lost. I didn't have a purpose or a plan, and I didn't have anyone to talk to who'd gone through it," said the Middlesex resident. Feeling alone or falling apart after treatment is common, because patients have the space to feel again, said Nancy Cullinan, LCSW, CDE, CPT, Psychosocial Program Coordinator at the Steeplechase Cancer Center at RWJ

Somerset. "Participating in support programs is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength, to fortify patients for a challenging situation," she added.

The support programs are part of the "full package of everything cancer patients need" to heal, said Kathleen Toomey, MD, Medical Director of The Steeplechase Cancer Center at RWJ Somerset. "Every patient gets the collective knowledge of every expert at the cancer center through our multidisciplinary approach, and the very latest in care," she said. The Steeplechase Cancer Center, a standalone facility served by its own private parking lot, is conveniently located on the RWJ Somerset campus. It is home to renowned cancer care experts, state-of-the-art diagnostic and imaging equipment, the most advanced technologies and therapies and the area's largest support and wellness calendar with nearly 20 different classes offered each month. Another unique amenity patients can take advantage of at the center is the Sanofi Wellness Boutique to help patients look, feel and be their best through features like a certified fitter trained to help with breast prostheses, lymphedema garments and wigs.

Although Ms. Coco and Ms. Girvan both completed their traditional treatment at the center years ago, they still participate in Wellness Workout, the support group, and classes such as yoga, Tai Chi, and healthy cooking, all part of an integrative therapy program. In the support group, they now help other women with breast cancer. "I let other women going through what I went

Shown right: Nancy Cullinan, LCSW, CDE, CPT, Psychosocial Program Coordinator at the Steeplechase Cancer Center at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Somerset is instrumental in developing the calendar of support programs available, and also facilitates the group where Ms. Coco and Ms. Girvan met.



through know that it's going to be okay," said Ms. Girvan.

Along with another group of women they met, Ms. Coco and Ms. Girvan regularly make plans to get together outside of the center. Whether it's a simple lunch, or more recently, a day trip to a lavender farm, the powerful bond these women developed through sharing and listening to each other's experiences is an important piece of the healing process. "I'm still scared the cancer will come back, but I have such a good support system now with other girls that are going through this that it's not as terrifying as it was in the beginning," said Ms. Coco.

Support programs are not limited to breast cancer patients, nor are they limited to patients treated at RWJ Somerset. The complementary programs and groups have something to offer everyone including patients, caregivers, community members and patients receiving treatment elsewhere.

Visit www.rwjuh.edu/steeplechase or call 1-888-MD-RWJUH.

STEEPLECHASE CANCER CENTER PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

Women's Cancer Support Group
Wednesdays: October 14 and 28;
November 11 and 25; December 9 and 23;
11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Lunch will be provided.

Men's Cancer Support Group
Wednesdays: October 14 and 28;
November 11 and 25; and December 9 and 23;
6:30 to 8 p.m.

Spirituality Support Group
Wednesdays: October 7 and 21;
November 4 and 18; December 2 and 16;
1 to 2 p.m.

Young Women's Support Group:
women under 45 years of age
Tuesdays: October 20; November 17;
December 15;
6:30 p.m.

Breast Cancer Education and Networking Group
Tuesdays: October 13; November 10; December 8;
6:30 to 8 p.m.

**Support Group for Persons with
Oral, Head and Neck Cancer**
Wednesdays: October 21; November 18; December 16;
6 to 7 p.m.

Multiple Myeloma Support Group
Wednesdays: October 7; November 4; December 2;
7 to 9 p.m.

**"Survivors In Motion"
Oncology Rehabilitation Program**
Call 908-203-6243.

Wigs and Accessories
Tuesday: November 17
1 to 3 p.m.

Look Good, Feel Better
Mondays: October 19; December 21;
10 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Nutrition and Cooking Class
Thursday, October 22: Fall Harvest
November 12: Squash, Squash, Squash!
December 10: Thai Holiday
1 to 2 p.m.

Registration required. Call 908-927-8721.