

# The Southampton Press

November 17, 2005

## Living with Hope in the Face of Cancer

To many, cancer is not just a disease, it is the face of a friend, a relative, a spouse. On Saturday, a few of those faces—faces of survivors—were on display at a panel discussion sponsored by Fighting Chance, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping cancer patients, and Southampton Hospital.

The panel was a part of the “Day of Hope” conference held at the Bay Street Theatre, a day that also featured panels with leading oncologists from around the country, a seminar on cancer in the workplace, and an introduction to the power of relaxation as applied to cancer treatment.

Karrie Robinson, a social worker with Fighting Chance, introduced the survivor panel with a proverb: “To know the road ahead, ask those coming back.”

The panel focused on issues that every cancer patient goes through, such as how, despite the advances in treatment and recovery, there is still a great need for human contact and empathy—something doctors often lack.

“I think my doctor saw me as the disease, as a group of cells,” said panelist Jeremy Samuelson, a freelance journalist from East Hampton. “While she was a great doctor, sometimes it feels like it wouldn’t have mattered if I had walked in without a head.”

Many stories from the panelists

elicited nods from members of the audience, many of whom are cancer patients themselves.

Speaker Jan Moran struck a chord with many of the attendees when she described doing fevered research in response to her diagnosis, something she had in common with other patients. “I visited every website in existence,” Ms. Moran said. “I became the researcher, but I pretended that I was researching for someone else—it was easier that way.”

Feelings of uncertainty were evident in the stories of the panelists and questions the audience asked of the doctors, which were often questions about how to complement their own treatments. Topics ranged from diet to alternative therapies such as yoga.

“I felt like I didn’t understand the language I needed to get the answers I thought should have been readily available to me,” Mr. Samuelson said. “Should I sleep more? Is exercise going to make it worse or better? I just wanted to know what I needed to do to save my own life.”

Another panelist, Charles Hitchcock, dean at the Southampton graduate campus of Long Island University and a longtime member of the Southampton College community, and a prostate cancer survivor, talked about one of the hardest choices cancer patients face: how to treat the disease.

“I didn’t know the first thing about prostate cancer, but I had to make a decision,” said Mr. Hitchcock, a Springs

resident. “I was playing Russian roulette. I picked the one with the lowest mortality rate, and 10 days after my diagnosis I decided to have my prostate removed.”

Looking back, Mr. Hitchcock said, he wished he had prepared himself more for the side effects of his treatment.

“They gave me female hormone injections to slow the tumor’s growth,” Mr. Hitchcock said. “I would dream that the hormone was like Pac-Man, eating all the cancer cells.” He didn’t know that “one of the effects of the injection would be a mimicking of a woman’s menopause,” he continued. “It came to be that at a faculty meeting I was chairing, I found myself in a sheet of perspiration, and then I experienced a great need to cry when it was completely uncalled for.”

The panelists said they wanted to encourage awareness and openness about cancer. “I am here today because I am convinced that men need to talk about these kinds of health concerns,” Mr. Hitchcock said. “A lot of men are just not comfortable talking about it.”

Mr. Hitchcock also went through a recurrence. Just after his surgery, his doctor had told him that they had found a cancer cell outside of his prostate, which could potentially lead to a recurrence. Years later, when tests revealed he was once again at risk, he underwent 37 radiation treatments.

“Five days a week, I drove each morning from East Hampton to Riverhead, received my radiation, and then on to work at the college,” said Mr. Hitchcock. “It has been a remarkable journey.”

The effects of that “journey of the soul,” as Ms. Robinson calls it, can be overwhelming. Harry Heller, an East Hampton resident and the only caregiver on the panel, spoke about his wife’s ex-

perience with breast cancer.

“In Hamptons life, we take for granted air, water and breathing, and believe our greatest needs are getting restaurant reservations on Saturday night, or the offer we just made on a house in Sagaponack,” Mr. Heller said. “But when suddenly life and air are threatened, these other needs become minor.”

“It’s a disease that affects your body, but also your soul and your mind,” said panelist Susie Roden, a Water Mill resident. “In a split second, your whole life changes. I thought I would die, I thought no one would ever love me again, because I was defective. All of us are insecure in some way, and we think things that just aren’t true.” Ms. Roden dealt with her breast cancer in an increasingly common way—she devoted herself to helping others with cancer. She started the South Fork Breast Health Coalition, which now helps patients with breast cancer cope with a variety of programs. “After my experience, I said, ‘I’ll be damned if I let this happen to any other woman,’” Ms. Roden said. “When I was diagnosed, there was no one on the East End to turn to. But I put all the energy I had put into denial and anger into helping others, and that’s what made me well.”

“You have to choose to live, to fight. Here’s something I heard that I think people should live by: ‘Do not let your imagination scare you to death. Let your imagination inspire you to live.’”

Harry Heller, Susie Roden and Charles Hitchcock spoke at the Day of Hope cancer conference at the Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor on Saturday.

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