

New Day and New Digs for Fighting Chance Therapy dogs, benefit bash, and more outreach than ever



The staff of Fighting Chance gathered recently at the organization's new headquarters on Bay Street in Sag Harbor.

photo: c.b. grubb

BY JENNIFER LANDES

1,000 to 1,500 people each year are diagnosed with some kind of cancer on the East End. Of those, 350 end up dying in hospice care within that year, according to Duncan Darrow, the founder and chairman of Fighting Chance in Sag Harbor.

The diagnosis, as one patient described it, "is like being struck by lightning." Mr. Darrow said he envisioned the service organization as a resource to answer the questions patients have within 48 hours of being told of their disease, and to let them know what services are available in an area somewhat remote from specialty health care.

He started the organization in a garage in 2002 after seeing the struggles his mother went through during treatment on the East End. He began with a vision for a guide to services, and as the years have passed he has continued with symposiums, Web site development, psychological support, targeted informational materials, and even practical support such as cleaning services and transportation.

And now the group has a bright and cozy new headquarters on Bay Street in Sag Harbor, with a library, conference area, and private meeting rooms all designed to be warm and welcoming to patients and caregivers dealing with trauma. A sold-out benefit for the group will be held on Saturday at the Wolffer Estate Vineyard in Sagaponack.

A large portion of those diagnosed with cancer on the South Fork find their way to Fighting Chance, where they are given free counseling and a variety of information

targeted to their disease and appropriate to their willingness and ability to absorb that information.

The oncology social workers include Karrie Robinson, who came out of retirement from Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center to help the organization as director of clinical programs, William De Scipio, a clinical psychologist, and Margaret Bromberg, an oncology social worker.

With few cancer specialists serving the area, the group strives to step in and help with questions regarding the illness and the effects of treatment, as well as holistic approaches to well-being. It is not linked with any of the East End hospitals, but Ms. Robinson said they have an informal relationship with them. "We know when one of our patients leaves the hospital" after treatment, for example, or when they go back in for more.

Hearing the concerns of patients firsthand has given the group a unique role in advocacy and in meeting needs such as patient literacy. Fighting Chance has joined an effort to change the way doctors speak to be more intelligible to those outside the field. Having three oncologists on its board makes these discussions easier to have.

On its own, it has devised a flip-chart booklet called "Cancer Simplified," which provides a 15-minute education in the basic biology of the illness, the cost of treatment, the types of treatment and the aftereffects, services available, questions to ask, and how to navigate it all. It is one of the first things given to Fighting Chance patients.