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Fighting Chance to Honor Cormaria's Sister Ann at Annual Gala



Sister Ann Marino is in her 35th year with Cormaria Retreat House in Sag Harbor. Christine Sampson photo

Fighting Chance held its very first board meeting years ago around a big, wooden table overlooking the bay at the Cormaria Retreat House, where Sister Ann Marino led a conversation that would set the tone for the Sag Harbor-based cancer support organization's next 16 years.

"She said, 'What I'd like to do is go around the table and have everyone talk about an experience they may have had with cancer,'" Duncan Darrow, founder of Fighting Chance, recalled in an interview. "Then she said, 'I'll tell you what. I'll begin.'"

Sister Ann, who has been with Cormaria 35 years, said she is a cancer survivor herself, having overcome bladder cancer in 1974. She said it was an experience that led her closer to God, and one that gave her the ability to understand the particular difficulties and needs experienced by those undergoing cancer treatment.

"I learned a lot from that," she said this week. "I never wanted to say I had cancer. I was supposed to be the strong nun, and all of a sudden I became human. Through that, I became compassionate and traveled with many people through their journeys with cancer."

For her contributions supporting Fighting Chance and the people who come to it for help, the organization is honoring Sister Ann this year with its Medal of Honor at its annual gala on Saturday.

"It's given to someone who has made an extraordinary contribution improving the quality of care for cancer patients on the East End," Mr. Darrow said. "You can't

get this by being 'man of the year' because all of your vendors are going to buy tables. You can only get this by earning it."

A frequent request of Fighting Chance's clients is counseling from a minister, priest, rabbi or other cleric. Sister Ann provides that for many of them, Mr. Darrow said.

"There is a hunger among people on the cancer journey to explore whether there is a higher being, whether there is a heaven," he said. "Some wonder about spirituality that they can grab onto that might ease the anxiety and fear of the journey. What I think is so terrific about Sister Ann is that she is a wonderful listener. She offers a very gentle, user-friendly way of discussing spirituality. She's not banging the drum for Catholicism or any particular religion. What she seems to do so effectively is sort of tease out of an individual whether they've got a little bit of spirituality in them, and almost everyone does, and she helps nurture and grow that so it becomes one of the pillars you can lean on as you go through the ups and downs of the cancer journey."

Sister Ann lauded the ways it has grown over the years, and said she feels honored to be recognized.

"I'm just one of many, many people who have helped this organization," she said. "The office is such a welcoming place, so bright and cheery, and everyone is there to listen. Everyone has a smile. I don't feel that I earned this honor. It's a privilege for me to be honored by Fighting Chance."

She was an original member of its board of directors, often holding prayer and meditation groups on Wednesdays.

"Her Wednesday prayer/meditation groups offered a spiritual context for solace, contemplation and growth," said Karrie Robinson, who recently retired as Fighting Chance's director of clinical services and programs. "Sister Ann has always had a generous spirit and continues to be dedicated to the wellbeing of all. She truly represents the finest counselor/consoler we have, and stands out as a paradigm of goodness, particularly in this day and age."

Fighting Chance, while continuing to offer its traditional programs of counseling, wellness and transportation assistance, will open a rent-free satellite office in Stony Brook Southampton Hospital's new Phillips Family Cancer Center when the facility is completed. The hospital broke ground in June of 2017 and hospital officials said at the time construction would take 18 months.

The organization this month received accreditation from the Joint Commission, the national entity that audits hospitals so they meet the standards required to receive Medicare reimbursements. To Mr. Darrow's knowledge, the Joint Commission has never accredited a cancer counseling center, "but since we are moving into the Phillips Family Cancer Center, we took it upon ourselves to seek accreditation as a cancer center," he said.

"No one ever said you better do this, but I think [the hospital] they saw we had our own accreditation, I think they appreciated it," Mr. Darrow said. "We upped our game a little bit in terms of our procedures and the paperwork."

Despite these new developments farther west, he said Fighting Chance "has no desire to franchise."

"We're a local charity," he said, "and that's what we want to continue to be."

The annual Fighting Chance "On the Beach" gala is Saturday at 6:30 p.m. at a private location in East Hampton. Tickets are \$400. For more information, visit fightingchance.org/events.