

HOODVIEW NEWS

SERVING GRESHAM, BORING, SANDY AND MORE AUGUST 2022

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Cathy Keathley and Jerry Hinton seek to rejoin the Gresham City Council, restore safety — PAGE 10

Photo Mike Wiley

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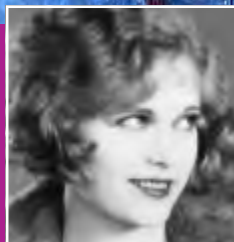
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SISTA' Power

HER BELOVED SON DIED MYSTERIOUSLY. THEN SHE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH BREAST CANCER. SO **DEB HART** FOUNDED **PINK SISTAS** TO HELP WOMEN LIKE HER FIND SUPPORT AND OVERCOME LIFE'S TRAGEDIES — PAGE 4

BY NIKKI DAVIDSON



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PART 2: 1921 PDX SLASHER MURDER — “TIGRESS” WIFE ON TRIAL!

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SISTA' Power

HER BELOVED SON DIED MYSTERIOUSLY. THEN SHE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH BREAST CANCER. SO **DEB HART** FOUNDED **PINK SISTAS** TO HELP WOMEN LIKE HER FIND SUPPORT AND OVERCOME LIFE'S TRAGEDIES.

By **NIKKI DAVIDSON**
Contributor

Her email handle is “inspirationaldebhart,” but 16 years ago, Deb Hart did not feel inspirational — she was devastated.

If she hadn't checked her calendar, she might not have made it to her doctor's appointment for a yearly pap smear and mammogram.

It was just seven months after the sudden and shocking

death of her 22-year-old son, Kasey D. Collins. He died in 2006, and the following months were just a blur as the grief and trauma of losing a child took hold of her heart. Her son was a tugboat captain and had been found dead on the boat, with no clear answers as to what exactly happened to him.

All Deb Hart knew was that his heart stopped, and it felt like hers did too.

“I was completely taken over by grief,” said Hart. “In

seven months, I hadn't colored my hair, and I hadn't done my nails. I had totally checked out.”

But somehow, she made it to that doctor's appointment for a checkup. It may have saved her life. Scans revealed she had stage 3 breast cancer, and Hart believes the disease progressed rapidly due to the beating her body had taken from grief.

“We have very little cancer in our family,” said Hart. “I was the walking specimen of health, but that grief sent me into one hell of a tailspin, a downhill spiral.”

After a double mastectomy, 26 rounds of chemo and nearly two years later, she made it to “the other side,” when there was no longer any evidence of the disease in her body. But her battle wasn't over; she had to fight to feel alive again.

A turning point

Deb Hart struggled with the decision of what to do next. Her body scans may have been clear, but she felt far from healed.

“I always say that my story is really not about surviving breast cancer,” she said. “It's about surviving the death of my son and having breast cancer. I call that the year from hell, and it truly was a year from hell.”

Her oncologist suggested that she look up Project Grace, an international organization that provides emotional support for parents who have lost a child. Another patient had attended one of the organization's grief retreats and considered it “life-changing.”

Hart signed up for a trip with the group to Greece, nine other mothers who had lost a child would be traveling with her.

“At that point in my life, I was so desperate to find something to get myself going again,” said Hart. “A parent who's lost a child only wants to hear from another parent who survived it. Because you don't think you're going to be able to survive it.”

Hart said the trip was a “turning point,” and she finally felt validation for the feelings she experienced. She got to interact with other mothers who had lost children, and when she saw that they learned to keep going, she could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

“It was perfectly clear to me when I returned home what I needed to do, and that was to help other breast cancer survivors because I had survived that too,” she said.

Hart wanted to share her story, and it helped her heal. That desire led her to join the Gresham Toastmasters Club. She remembers nervously attending her first meeting about three years after her son died.

“They asked me to stand up and just share my experience, and I stood up, and I just burst into tears,” she recalled, adding that a professor at Portland State University approached her after the meeting and offered to mentor her.

She found that telling her son's story gave her comfort she couldn't find anywhere else. She knew that storytelling could help other people deal with their trauma as well, especially when surrounded by those who have been through it.

In 2012, she started a group for breast cancer fighters and survivors to come together and talk. She named the club the Pink Sistas.

“It wasn't a matter of if, but when”

For Tami Starkey, breast cancer was like a dark shadow, stalking her, waiting to strike.

Her mother, aunt and grandma had all been diagnosed with the disease at varying ages, providing evidence of a strong genetic link.

“It wasn't a matter of if I was to get it, but when,” said Starkey.



Getting started on a Pink Sistas Day retreat. (Image courtesy Deb Hart)

Her own diagnosis came at age 40. Although she expected it eventually, a deep wave of despair set in.

“I'm a religious person, and I didn't even feel like I could pray for myself or that there was any hope,” said Starkey. “For me, it was the darkest days of my life.”

“I was scared, I didn't know anybody, but the way (Deb) reaches out to you and talks to you, even via text, she is somebody who cares about you and wants you to feel love and to feel accepted and to feel like you're part of something big,” said Starkey.

A friend at church suggested Starkey connect with a woman named Deb Hart. She nervously accepted it as a lifeline, reluctantly signing up for a retreat with the Pink Sistas.

“I was scared, I didn't know anybody, but the way (Deb) reaches out to you and talks to you, even via text, she is somebody who cares about you and wants you to feel love and to feel accepted and to feel like you're part of something big,” said Starkey.

The retreat was so impactful and soothing to Starkey that despite her hectic schedule of working two jobs, she asked to join the organization's board of directors as a volunteer.

“When it's something you love to do, and you feel is so beneficial to others, you make that happen,” she said.

“It's strange how we've all had the same thing, but we all have a different story,” said

Starkey. “(Deb) helps each person to talk about their specific journey; no two people's experiences are the same, and it just helps to heal.”

“I didn't have to be the strong one”

When Annie Hunnicutt found a lump in her left breast at age 32, she wasn't sure what it meant. Doctors weren't either and suggested a “wait and see” approach to see if it went away, but it only got bigger.

By the time she got into imaging, the tumor had nearly tripled in size and spread to her lymph nodes. The missing clue to the lump's severity was hidden in plain sight. Unknown to Annie, she had a family history of breast cancer on her mother's side.

The timing of her diagnosis was a nightmare. Her father passed away months earlier, and she was raising two children, ages 3 and 5. To make matters worse, her marriage was on the rocks.

“I went through four months of intense chemo, followed by a bilateral mastectomy,” Hunnicutt said. Her treatment required 30 rounds of radiation, followed by four reconstruction surgeries.

A family member knew Deb Hart and suggested the two women get in touch. At the time, Hunnicutt didn't realize just how important that connection would become.

Hart attended the fundraising events when Hunnicutt's hometown organized a benefit for her medical bills. Deb Hart also checked on Hunnicutt at the hospital and helped her family with errands. When Hunnicutt got divorced, Hart helped guide her through the process.

“She's just been there every step of the way,” said Hunnicutt.

Hunnicutt returned the

■ CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



Angela Karzes and Deb Hart embarking on another Pink Sistas Day Retreat excursion. (Image courtesy Deb Hart)





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Tami Canales, Najula Scott, Cindy Garcia, Linda Lindberg, Angela Karzes, and Bradley Fletcher on the Pink Sistas boat, named the "Pink Drifta." The boat was donated by Weston Dealership. (Photo courtesy Deb Hart)

Deb Hart Inspires

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

favor. She stepped in to fill an empty spot as a volunteer to help a Pink Sista's group during one of the retreats.

"Going and spending the day with those ladies was the first time I didn't feel like I had to be the strong one," said Hunnicutt. "With my family, everything we were going through – not just my health – I always had to be the strong one. So being around those ladies and being able to let my guard down and not feel like I had to be the strongest person

who has made a choice to turn all of that loss into positive energy and try to do something to help others. She's amazing at what she does."

"I couldn't even look at it"

As Bradley O'Neil lay in bed one night, she felt a slight itch that led her fingers to a lump in her chest that was about the size of a pea. She always went for her yearly mammograms and had never noticed anything unusual on her body before. Frightened, she immediately called her doctor's office and went in for a checkup the next day.

The doctor assumed it was a false alarm, likely a calcium deposit, and assured her it didn't look suspicious. However, O'Neil wasn't ready to accept that answer and didn't think twice when the medical staff asked if she wanted a biopsy.

"And I'm like, 'are you kidding me? Yes, I want a biopsy,'" said O'Neil. "So, a couple of days later, I came back for the biopsy."

Three days passed, and she got a phone call informing her the lump was invasive ductal carcinoma, breast cancer. A blur of doctor's visits and questions followed her diagnosis.

"They just kind of throw

everything at you so fast," said O'Neil. "Appointment after appointment." After getting a second opinion, she decided to get a full mastectomy.

"I was one of the lucky ones that didn't have to do chemo because I found it as quickly as I did," she said. "I mean, literally the next day, I was into my appointment. Don't let a doctor tell you 'no.' Don't let a doctor tell you you're too young. If you have something, ask for a biopsy."

Her friends and family tried to support her by buying t-shirts and socks laden with little pink ribbons, but she couldn't even look at them.

"The biggest thing to me was the "c" word, cancer, I couldn't say it. If it came up on television, I'd have to turn the channel," said O'Neil. "My feeling was, 'Wait a minute, I'm not celebrating that I had breast cancer.' I didn't want it and couldn't even look at it. I don't think people realize that until you get to that point where you accept it in your healing that you can be around that kind of stuff."

She slowly learned that other people who survived the disease understood her feelings and connected with Pink

■ CONTINUED ON PAGE 27



Hart led the publishing of a book with women writing about their experiences with breast cancer. It is available at local stores, including Shop Girl Consignment in Downtown Gresham.

in the room and hold it all together for everyone else, I finally got some release."

Hunnicutt considers Hart a matchmaker for the Gresham community of breast cancer fighters and survivors, connecting people that have walked a similar path. Hunnicutt herself is now driven to reach out to the other young moms in Pink Sistas and ensure they have the support they need.

"(Deb) is one of the biggest-hearted people I have ever met," said Hunnicutt. "She's gone through tremendous loss in her own life, and she is one of the few people I've found



Deb Hart drives the "Pink Drifta" boat and is the founder and driving force behind Pink Sistas. (Image courtesy Deb Hart)



Deb Hart inspires cancer survivors

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Sistas. She admits she canceled a few times before being able to attend a retreat due to medical appointment issues, but it felt like home once she arrived.

"It was the most relaxing meeting to meet people you didn't know," said O'Neil. "I wasn't nervous, and it was the most comfortable encounter when you know that these people have experienced something very similar to you. It was so easy to talk to them."

Now O'Neil works as a board member for



Ready to board: (L to R) Katharine Burton, Jan Lee Hill, Marla Cohen down the ramp to the boat. (Photo courtesy Deb Hart)

Pink Sistas, helping with fundraising operations. Although her cancer is gone, she still leans on the group's support to deal with the disease's lingering pain and health impacts. Now, that little pink ribbon isn't as terrible as it once was.

"Shoot, I've got all of it," she said, explaining that pink ribbons appear on a large portion of her wardrobe. "I just wasn't ready when I was going through it. After going to Pink Sistas and meeting all these other women with similar stories – I know we're all so different but similar, you get to a point where you accept it."

A bond on the river

Being a Pink Sista isn't always easy. A group of women with the same medical issues understands that life shouldn't be taken for granted.

"We've lost several women," O'Neil said. "The scary thing is to hear that it comes back for any of them. That's just devastating. You have a bond with these women, what they've been through and how hard it's been. For it to come back worse than it did the first time, it's just devastating."

O'Neil, Hunnicutt and Starkey now serve as volunteers on the Pink Sistas board of directors. Deb Hart continues to be the group's leader, dedicating her full-time effort to running the retreats. The Pink Sistas are hard to miss, floating down the Columbia River on a 22-foot party barge wrapped with pink lettering and bubbles.

"The retreats are just built around women who want to laugh again and giggle again," said Hart. "I've had women say to me, 'Oh my God, I just giggled. I haven't giggled in two years.'"

Pink Sistas is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization based in the Columbia River Gorge in Fairview, Oregon. The retreats are held from July to September when the current in the Columbia River Gorge slows down. There are no paid staff

members on the board, and donations go entirely to the mission of providing a free retreat to breast cancer fighters and survivors.

The retreats typically start when the attendees board the party barge, donated through the efforts of Jan Weston, Chief Financial Officer of Weston Dealerships. The women enjoy a lunch cooked by Hart and then get a chance to share their stories in an intimate environment. To lighten the mood after the emotional exchange, attendees get back out on the water in kayaks and canoes.

Last year 87 women attended Pink Sistas retreats, and 110 women are signed up this year. They take place during the week, in groups of 8 to 10 people. They come from all over the area, including Oregon and Washington, and have various prognoses.

"It's an eclectic group of women that arrive at a location and walk down that ramp. Some of them are pretty vulnerable, and it's scary to them," said Hart. "We learn so much about each other and the journey. There are tears shed, and there are always tears shed."



FUN ON THE WATER: Katharine Burton and Jana Lee Hill enjoying recreation. (Photo courtesy Deb Hart)

How to support "Pink Sistas"

Pink Sistas Retreats are funded primarily by donations and fundraising efforts, at no cost to those attending. It's essential to Hart that the retreats are free because of the overwhelming burden medical bills place on many cancer fighters. A \$25 donation can fully fund one participant's attendance at the retreat. The group also sells a published version of the women's stories they authored, titled, "Wave After Wave of Pink: Women Warriors Share Tales of The Storm."

More information about how to donate can be located at www.pinksistas.org. ■

The future is unwritten

Deb Hart has had no evidence of cancer in her body since she finished treatment 14 years ago. She's focused on keeping her weight down, eating healthy, and exercising and hopes to pass on the good vibes to all of the other survivors.

"I'm knocking that wood fence that I'm parked by right now to tell you that (cancer-free) I'm good to go, good to go," she said. "I can just really say, 'Dear Cancer, you picked the wrong girl because I'm healthy. I have learned to put a lot of joy in my life, and telling my story only continues to heal me.'" **HVN**

Nikki Davidson is a freelance writer.

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