

Girls 'Get in Touch' with cancer awareness

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Mary Ann Wasil Nilan, breast cancer survivor and founder of The Get in Touch Foundation, talks about the launching of her organization which educates young girls on the importance of breast self-exams Tuesday in Milford.

MILFORD -- When Mary Ann Wasil Nilan was diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago, she immediately thought of her two adolescent daughters.

What did it mean for them?

Nilan, a Milford resident, thought of how she had discovered the lump after years of faithful self-examination and how, after a negative mammogram, a doctor told her to come back in a year.

The doctor was annoyed when she insisted on a biopsy, but it was a good thing she did: She had an aggressive form of cancer.

"If I had waited a year I wouldn't be here," she said. "Get in touch with your body to the point that you are your own best advocate."

That's the message that Nilan and the Get in Touch Foundation she started hope to convey to girls in fifth through 12th grades in Milford.

The campaign goes statewide in October, nationwide in 2011 and perhaps global at some point in the future.

On Tuesday, two years after it incorporated, the nonprofit launched a pilot of its Daisy Wheel program for girls at Pumpkin Delight School, where Principal Deborah Herbst is also a breast cancer survivor.

The program, which will be offered free in all Milford schools, incorporates information about regular breast self-examinations into the health and development curriculum for girls, such as introduction to puberty in fifth grade, according to Nilan and school nurse Deborah Smith.

Nilan and others said early detection is key, and girls as young as 10 have been diagnosed with the disease.

Using a hand-held pink daisy design that Nilan said was selected by focus groups of girls ranging in age from 8 to 18, the program outlines how girls can feel for breast abnormalities and urges them to tell someone they trust if they discover anything out of the ordinary.

"I think it's great to introduce this to them at this age," Smith said. "They'll feel so much more confident and comfortable and it'll become part of their routine." Several officials, including Mayor James L. Richetelli Jr., Supt. of Schools Harvey Polansky and former House Speaker James A. Amann, pledged their support for the program at Tuesday's launch.

The Association of School Nurses of Connecticut also endorsed the program and U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3, a cancer survivor herself, sent a letter praising it.

Herbst, who was diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago this November, said she was thrilled to mark the event at Pumpkin Delight.

"It's personal for me," she said, her eyes welling with tears. "I said to myself, 'If I can help one girl through this program, it would've been worth what I went through.' If we can start educating them now, when they get older it'll be like brushing their teeth."

Nilan said the foundation raised enough money to start the program in Milford through its "Get Your Pink on Day" last October, and will continue to seek funds so that it can be offered free in October to all schools in the state that want to participate. Danbury, she said, is already on board.

One dollar buys two "Daisy Wheels," she said.

Maggie McAndrew, whose mother is president of the foundation, said she never thought about breast cancer before seeing Nilan go through it, but now she's aware.

"It really shows me how important examining your body is," the 14-year-old said after the launch ceremony. "I'm excited to see other girls get to learn about the program. The more schools we can get it in, the better."

For more information, visit www.getintouchfoundation.org.