

Cancer lessons shared

Survivor promoting education for girls

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WESTPORT — A pretty pink suit. Perfect makeup. Bright smile. High, high heels. And, oh yes, perfect hair.

That's the Mary Ann Wasil Nilan a mostly female audience

■ **John Edwards** continues campaign despite wife's cancer. **A12**

of about 60 saw during a benefit tea organized by the Fairfield-based financial management company Investmark at The Westport Woman's Club Wednesday.

But in a slide show introducing Nilan, they saw the scars where her breasts used to be. They watched her break down, watched her children paint the head she shaved in anticipation of the effects of chemotherapy.

And discovered the breast cancer that kills so many actually saved her life.

"The story has a happy ending," the Milford resident assured her audience after the photographic record of the past three years of her life came to an end. "I'm alive."

She discovered the lump in her breast a little more than three years ago. Barely a month after beginning chemotherapy, she had a stroke. The doctors discovered, and fixed, the hole in her heart they might not have otherwise known about.

And a year after her October 2004 mastectomy, she hosted her first brunch for The Get In Touch Foundation.

One of the foundation's goals, she said, is to teach fifth-grade girls to get in touch with, and be comfortable with, their own bodies.

That's the age, she said, when health departments teach girls about menstruation, but "they don't ever talk about [breast] self-examination." She hopes to have an education program in place for October, which is breast cancer awareness month.

Nilan, director of development at St. Ann School in Milford and a former Stratford police officer, has two daughters and one son.

She knew her own body — monthly breast self-exams are not enough, she said — and had the confidence to ask questions and push for tests when she

first found the lump.

"Why are we waiting until girls are women?" she said. "We want girls to know their bodies better than their mothers ever did."

Nilan and Susan Patrick — herself the mother of three girls and the friend who helped with Nilan's children during the last three years — came up with the idea of a foundation to

help those living with breast cancer.

The photographs of Nilan's life over the past three years are the basis for a book, she's working on, "Go Ahead and Cry." She plans to give the book to women newly diagnosed with breast cancer.

"The bottom line is, cancer sucks."

Nilan has learned lessons that may help the women who come after her. She remembers leaving the doctor one day and seeing a former patient come in and tell the staff she had her life back. But waiting to reclaim your life is the wrong way to go about it, she believes. "You have to live right through it."

The first photo in the book is actually the last, taken only two weeks ago.

In it, she has hair and is wearing high heels and an open shirt, "showing off the girls," she said of her reconstructed breasts.

The foundation's Web site — www.getintouchfoundation.com — is still under construction, but Nilan eventually hopes to host forums where women and men can go to ask questions.

Nilan was the final speaker at Wednesday's fundraiser, which also included a brief fashion show from La Moda of Fairfield and Hamden.

Stratford residents Margaret Knablein and Mildred Kelly were among the audience.

Both know her well; Knablein said they go to almost all her events. Nilan attended

St. Joseph High School in Trumbull with Kelly's son and then the two women worked together during Nilan's seven years on the Stratford police force; Kelly was secretary to the Stratford police chief.

Barbara Levy, president of The Westport Woman's Club, said she came to support Nilan and her cause. The club, Levy added — listing women on her board who are either fighting breast cancer now or are marking anniversaries of past battles — is a big supporter of breast-cancer fundraising efforts.

"Who else is going to do it?" Levy asked.

The event even touched on other, related, subjects — money and staying healthy.

Sandra Brandon-Lee of Investmark, and a member of the foundation's board, delivered a short presentation about the need for women to be financially aware.



During the Girls Just Want To Have Funds ladies tea at the Westport Woman's Club to benefit The Get In Touch Foundation, from right, speaker and breast cancer survivor Mary Ann Wasil Nilan, founder of The Get In Touch Foundation, talked with guests Colleen Doyle Britt of Milford and Stephanie Vaughn of Trumbull during the event. (Tracy Deer/ CT Post)

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Get In Touch Foundation wants young women to be knowledgeable

Between 80 and 90 percent of women will end up managing their finances at some point in their lives, she said.

"We have to be educated and understand what it's about," Brandon-Lee said.

The tea for the fundraiser came courtesy of Cindi Bigelow, co-president of the Fairfield-based tea company her grandmother started more than 60 years ago.

Bigelow opened the event with a discussion about the health benefits of tea — even, she acknowledged, when it's not a Bigelow brand.

The health benefits come from the tea bush, the processing of which results in three types of tea — green, black and oolong.

Anti-oxidants are much stronger in black tea, which is made from crushing, exposing to air, drying and chopping the leaves.

Green tea comes from leaves that are steamed before being dried and chopped; oolong comes from leaves that are crushed and exposed to air for a shorter period.

"They're doing all kinds of cancer work with tea," Bigelow said, citing a raft of university studies and reports. Black tea is studied for its cardiovascular benefits, while green tea is part of cancer studies.

"You are drinking the brew of a vegetable. It is loaded with antioxidants."



Cindi Bigelow, co-president of R.C. Bigelow Inc. in Fairfield, talked to the guests at the Girls Just Want To Have Funds event about the health benefits of tea. (Tracy Deer/Connecticut Post)



Mary Ann Wasil Nilan gave a moving and inspiring presentation. (Kathy Nemecc-Lucas Photography)



Event organizer Sandra Brandon-Lee of Investmark welcoming guests to the event. (Kathy Nemecc-Lucas Photography)