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TOWN OF HUNTINGTON

From Kitchen To Cancer Coalition

Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition started with four women and one goal

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Autumn's touch of color is in the air as hues of orange, red, yellow and pink – yes, pink – are seen everywhere. Breast Cancer Awareness Month is winding down this October, but the Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition (HBCAC) is going strong, as seen by the pink-ribbon-wearing shoppers down Main Street, pink bumper stickers on cars and pink-T-shirt-wearing servers in restaurants across town.

The American Cancer Society estimates that 200,000 more people will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year. The disease changes lives in an instant – a fact Karen Joy Miller, founder of the Huntington grassroots organization, knows all too well.

Miller never doubted her strength. A self-proclaimed “gym rat,” Miller went to the gym six days a week, raced in half-marathons and trained her body to be a “lean, mean, clean machine.” Outside of the gym, Miller headed an interior design business and raised three children with her husband, Michael.

Come Thanksgiving 1987, everything came to a halt. Miller was busy finalizing recipes, counting her ingredients and getting the turkey ready when she was given the news of her breast cancer diagnosis.

“One minute you’re living your life and the next, you have cancer. I realized I needed people,” she said.

She broke the news to her family after the meal. “I told them that I wasn’t sure if I could beat it,” she said.

Miller was getting used to the idea that cancer wasn’t something she could beat alone. Shortly before her mastectomy, Miller closed her interior design business, spent time at home with her husband and children, and talked about her diagnosis with her friends at the gym who had become a second family to her. With their support, she was determined to get back to her normal self, and to her workout routine. Two days after surgery, Miller was in the front row of her aerobics class.

With a sisterhood of support behind her, Miller decided to post a note at the gym’s reception desk. She asked for anyone who wanted to learn more about breast cancer and work on its related issues to contact her. Three young women, none with breast cancer themselves, responded. In 1992, the small group met in Miller’s kitchen, came up with a name for themselves and each put in about \$30. They decided that they would provide assistance and support for those with breast cancer and educate others about the disease. With four members and one goal, the Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition was born.

Their first plan of action was to see who else would be interested in working on breast cancer-related issues. The group sent out a survey to every household in the Town of Huntington to women over the age of 25.

“We expected to get maybe a few hundred responses. We got 34,000,” Miller said.

Today, the grassroots coalition is nationally recognized for its work helping thousands of women and families with breast cancer diagnoses, as well as educating the public about environmental factors that may contribute to developing breast cancer.

The not-for-profit recently wrapped up a seven-year study with the National Institute of Environ-



Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition founder Karen Miller’s belief in disease prevention prompted an off-shoot organization, Prevention is the Cure. The group’s LEAP frog, Ribbet, educates children on the topic.

mental Health Sciences about environmental factors such as chemicals and toxins that have been linked to breast cancer, and will soon begin a second five-year study.

From assisting with prescription costs to cleaning the home of a breast cancer patient, the organization provides all kinds of services imaginable for those diagnosed with the disease.

For Miller, saying goodbye to breast cancer isn’t about finding a cure. It’s about finding the causes. The coalition has taken a leading role in its “Prevention is the Cure” mission.

“I don’t think there’s a cure, but by making better life choices, I think we’re going to see less chance of the disease,” Miller said. “I think we’re going to see a lot of families going back to their roots and we’re going to spend more time choosing the things we eat and what we decide to put on our dinner plates.”

It was Miller’s own lesson in needing the support around her that was the driving force behind creating the coalition. Now the work of Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition helps thousands across the township and throughout the state.

The coalition helped make New York one of the

first states to pass a law to ban the sale of plastics containing Bisphenol A (BPA) in baby and toddler products. The organization was a leading contributor to studies that showed a link between BPA chemicals and early onset puberty, which could lead to breast cancer later in life, as well as the potential risks from chemicals in household cleaning products. The HBCAC received the 2010 Environmental Protection Agency Environmental Quality Award for its efforts.

Miller said the organization’s success is a result of the people and town around her.

“The reason our little group has become what it has, is really because of the resources that have come together in this town. We could have never done it alone and we have the town to thank for it,” she said.

Her advice for other local not-for-profits?

“When you start, don’t be afraid – even if it wasn’t your original idea. Don’t be rigid. More opportunities lead to more resources,” she said. “Let your neighbors help and support you and always keep an open door in your community.”