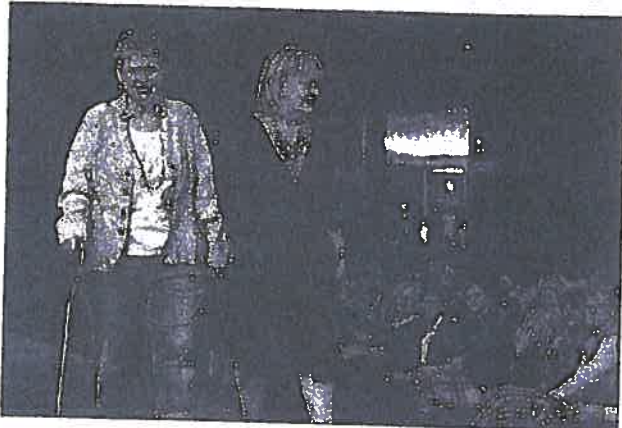


MY LIFE, MY WORDS



John Larkin Photography

Suzanne Smith, who has a type of leukemia, and Jackie Di Bella participate in the Gilda's Club Spring Fashion Show at the Hyatt Regency on April 11.

Cancer can't silence bravery

JACQIE DI BELLA

When a student walks into an instructor's classroom for the first time, the mentor never knows what role he/she is going to play in that individual's life. That is exactly what happened to me when Suzanne Smith walked into my public speaking classroom at Genesee Community College in 2008.

Sue was a non-traditional student and was apprehensive about this course because of her fear of public speaking. I have a warm place in my heart for adult students because I know the challenges they face.

On May 17, 2009, Suzanne Smith graduated with a degree in Hospitality and Tourism. Sue told me that the day she walked into the doors of GCC, she was a confused individual, but when she exited in the spring of 2009, she was a confident, articulate woman with her associate's degree.

When Sue walked across the stage, she was walking with a slight limp. She thought that perhaps she had pulled a muscle in her leg. Shortly after graduation, she enrolled at Empire State College to complete her undergraduate degree.

During the summer, it became more difficult for Sue to walk as the pain in her lower back and leg became excruciating. She went to see her doctor and was treated for sciatica. In October, Sue fell and broke her hip. During surgery, the doctors found a six-inch tumor embedded in her bones between the hip and pelvis. The tumor was malignant. She was diagnosed with myeloma, a rare form of leukemia.

to quote Sue: "I went from a happy, self-sufficient, 48-year-old, independent woman to being scared and facing mortality. ... I must be optimistic and proactive in this fight I am faced with."

I know that when someone is diagnosed with cancer, it can be difficult to know what to do or say. I lost my father and husband to cancer and know first-hand that knowledge and support is a strong point. Staying in touch is vital, as cancer patients and their families often suffer feelings of loneliness and isolation.

I introduced Sue and her family to Camp Good Days and Special Times, Kids Adjusting Through Support, Gilda's Club and American Cancer Society.

I was the 2010 coordinator for the American Cancer Society's Daffodil Days at the college. Sue's positive attitude made her a perfect fit to become the campaign's spokesperson. Sue said: "This is the best medicine I could ever have — I finally found my voice and am no longer nervous about speaking before the public."

On April 11, Sue and I were in Gilda's Club Spring Fashion Show at the Hyatt Regency hotel. We walked hand-in-hand down the runway. As her former instructor, a very special relationship developed between the two of us. I want her to know that when she needs me, I will be there and when she needs to be alone, I will leave.

We are learning profound lessons together that encompass acceptance, communication, love, values, openness and happiness. These are cherished gifts given to both of us.

Sue still has quite a fight on her hands, but she is one of the strongest and bravest women I know. Nothing is impossible to a willing heart. □