



Loudoun's Color for Fall: Pink

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The Loudoun lowdown

By Nicholas Graham

Renelda Peldunas-Harter is able to dream that one day she will 'comb gray hair', as goes the epic poem by William Butler Yeats.

Tammy Gray will one day sit with a grandchild in her lap, cardboard birthday hat askew on her head, and together softly blow out a candle on a birthday cake..

That's because both of these Loudoun ladies have fought breast cancer. And won.

They are just two of 2.5 million breast cancer survivors in the U.S., and both are local breast cancer activists. To them, and their families, each day is both a blessing, and a milestone.

But don't call Renelda a 'survivor'. If you do that, you're likely to get a swift retort.

Bristling a bit at the use of the term, she says, "real survivors are those who don't have anything at all - and still manage to exist." She states with resolve, "everyone is a survivor of something...of course, it's better to be a 'survivor' than the alternative. I don't consider myself a victim either - it's just...life."

Brave words from the new President of the Loudoun Breast Health Network, a local organization of breast cancer survivors and advocates for education and awareness of a disease you'll be hearing a lot about nationally - and locally - as Oct. 1st rings in "Breast Cancer Awareness Month".

In a way, we shortchange the cause of finding a cure for breast cancer by putting national awareness on a 30-day timer. Consider that 192,370 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in 2009, according to the American Cancer Society - that's almost 1 in 8 women who will be diagnosed in their lifetime. Tragically, 40,170 of those diagnosed this year will die from the disease. Breast cancer remains the second leading cause of cancer among women, after lung cancer.

The disease touches all of us in some way - for women, it's a risk every mother, sister, daughter, and wife must face.

But this is not just a women's disease. Tell that to the men in the lives of members of the Loudoun Breast Health Network - their husbands, sons, brothers, fathers, uncles and nephews. Of course, men need to care for another reason: roughly one in every 100 cases of breast cancer will strike them, according to the Susan G. Komen For The Cure organization.

In November 2002, Peldunas-Harter placed her hand on her breast and felt a lump, and was diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer here in Loudoun. At the time, she was in the military on active duty and about to head overseas.

After four intense months of chemotherapy and radiation, and a lumpectomy, Peldunas-Harter was over the worst. "I knew right off the bat I was going to beat it," she says. "I never had any doubts or bad moments. It was just a bump in the road for me."

What was the key to her success? Treatment cycles are now measured in days or weeks, not months or years, she says. New protocols and medications make a huge difference - and she claims that advances in the past seven years alone since she was diagnosed are "exponentially unbelievable."

Today, what women undergo is "not your grandmothers' breast cancer treatment," she says.

Other factors in Peldunas-Harter's recovery was the support she got from family and friends, keeping a positive attitude - and, of course, getting involved locally. "I want to be there to help guide others through this journey - it's difficult without someone," she says.

Gray was diagnosed in 1998 at age 35 when her daughter was just four. It came "out of the blue", she remembers. Her family had no prior history of the disease.

This fall, she marks a 10 year anniversary since her treatment ended - making this season extra special.

While others lament marking birthdays after age 40, Gray has no qualms. "I celebrate every single birthday. Now, I appreciate everything I have - and realize how lucky I am."

Peldunas-Harter leads a young and small organization here that aims to make a difference. Perhaps one woman at a time. One diagnosis at a time. One survival story at a time.

The LBHN has about 40 people signed up as volunteers and seven women serving on the Board. It got off the ground in 2005, and became a 501(c)3 in 2007. Without any county or state funding, it relies solely on the generosity of donors. But the difference it makes isn't measured in dollars - it's measured in the hope it inspires. Or, the lives it may help one day save.

That's priceless.

Peldunas-Harter and Gray hope to grow the LBHN and to become known as a reliable and trusted support group for women - and men - in Loudoun. They also interface with County oncologists and surgeons, so they are aware that LBHN exists to help.

"We want to be the one-stop shop on breast cancer in Loudoun County", she says, hopefully.

Loudouners can get involved by volunteering, donating, and going to LBHN events (www.lbhn.org). Of course, getting a mammogram yearly after age 40 is a given. And, by sharing each others stories.

Does activism really make a difference, I asked Renelda. Absolutely: "The years to get to the cure become shorter the more we get involved, become active, and raise funds."

This fall, these women and perhaps hundreds of others in Loudoun touched by this disease will inevitably take a journey of a different kind through winding country roads: the fabled fall foliage car trip.

On it, they will see leaves of gold and orange, red and even an odd purple.

Let's hope on that journey - this fall and in life - Renelda and Tammy see something that catches their eye, beautiful and unique in nature, even if just for a glimmer in time: the breast cancer survivor's 'four-leaf clover'.

A single fall leaf...in pink.