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A survivor's quest

Maureen Riopelle beat cancer, now she wants to help other women do the same

BY JOHN JOHNSTON / ENQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Cancer killed three of Maureen Riopelle's grandparents before she was born. It claimed her mother in June 2001. The following April, a 45-year-old sister was diagnosed with the disease. Four months later, a 56-year-old brother was battling it.

Yet Riopelle, who is 43 and lives in Milford, always believed her fate would be different.

"I never thought I would get cancer," she says. "I was an athlete. I took care of myself."

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Her family didn't have much history of breast cancer. But that was Riopelle's diagnosis in December 2003, at age 41.

This is the story of a survivor, one of the 10 million living Americans with a history of cancer. She refused to be defined by a disease, and with help from others, she took control of her life. But to survive was not enough. She wanted to thrive.

Now she has dedicated herself to helping other women do likewise. Next month, 40 female cancer survivors will gather at Camp Kern in Warren County for a weekend retreat called "From Surviving to Thriving."

They'll choose from a number of activities that include canoeing, rock climbing, yoga, massage, meditation, and equine-assisted therapy.

It's the first retreat sponsored by Mary's Circle of Hope/the Mary Maguire Foundation, a nonprofit that Riopelle founded last year and named in honor of mother.

Its mission is to support women as they adjust to life after cancer.

This year, about 1.4 million cancer cases will be diagnosed in this country, females accounting for about 679,560 of them. Thanks to advances in detection and treatment, the five-year survival rate for all cancers diagnosed between 1995 and 2001 is 65 percent, up from 50 percent in 1974-76, the National Cancer Institute says.

But adjusting to life after cancer can be difficult, Riopelle says. An acupuncturist she works with likens it to a soldier coming home from war. The soldier wants to return to a normal life. But war has changed him, and his life may never be quite the same.

Or as Riopelle says: "Just because a doctor says you're cancer-free doesn't mean you're free from cancer."

Her normal life took a turn in May 2003 when she found a lump in her breast. A mammogram several months later was negative. Riopelle's instincts told her to get a second opinion, which led to the confirmation of cancer.

She had confronted serious health problems before. As a University of Iowa freshman on a basketball scholarship, she endured five knee surgeries within a half year to repair serious ligament and cartilage damage. Doctors gave her only a 50 percent chance of walking again and said she would never run.

With grit and determination, she proved them wrong on both counts.

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Maureen Riopelle has planned a weekend retreat for female cancer survivors at Camp Kern in Warren County.

Maureen Riopelle file

Age: 43

Occupation: President and founder, Mary's Circle of Hope/the Mary Maguire Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports Greater Cincinnati women dealing with life after cancer. Works part time in market development for Pearson Prentice Hall.

Born: Green Bay, Wis.

Resides: Milford

Quote: "On the surface, it seems like (the foundation) is just helping people with a physical ailment, but it goes much deeper than that. It's about helping them feel empowered."

Circle of Hope/ The Mary Maguire Foundation

Named for: Mary Maguire Riopelle, a mother of 11 who died at age 82 of chronic lymphocytic leukemia.

Services: As money becomes available, the organization will offer individualized access to certified personal trainers, weight-management specialists and nutritionists; weekend wellness and empowerment retreats; financial assistance (for health, fitness and nutrition purposes); and educational and emotional assistance.

How it will work: A social worker will assess a survivor's needs and connect her with a certified professional. If needed services already exist, referrals will be made to organizations such as the Wellness Community or Cancer Family Care.

Who's eligible: Female cancer survivors

Cost: Free. (Must show financial need.)

Needs: Monetary and in-kind donations (beverages, fresh fruit, flowers, healthful snacks, disposable cameras, gift cards and store coupons). Also,

She summoned that same resolve to fight the cancer. Treatment consisted of two surgeries, six months of chemotherapy and seven weeks of radiation.

The chemo beat back the cancer but ravaged her body. Within two months, her slender frame had shed 25 pounds. Her muscles had atrophied to the point where she couldn't lift a 3-pound dumbbell. She couldn't walk to the end of her street.

"I saw how people's bodies were sometimes more broken after they went through treatment than when they started," she says. She saw, too, that women's spirits often needed mending as they dealt with issues such as body image, self-esteem and sexuality. A cancer patient typically is showered with attention and support during treatment, she says. But she was surprised to learn that once medical treatment ends, most resources dry up.

She could afford the "extras" that helped her get back on her feet. She saw a medical acupuncturist. She hired a personal trainer to help her regain strength.

Within a year, Riopelle had made remarkable progress. She now works out with 15- to 20-pound dumbbells and thinks nothing of rollerblading 15 miles.

"I realized how lucky I was," Riopelle says. "I had support. I had financial stability. I knew if I needed help I had a circle of people I could count on. And I saw there were other people who didn't have that."

She was profoundly affected by an encounter in the office of her radiation oncologist. A young mother with two young children in tow tearfully told a nurse: "I don't know how I'm going to be able to take care of my babies."

As Riopelle pondered the idea of a foundation to honor her mother, she worked with Debbie Phillips, a life coach from Massachusetts.

"I saw in this woman great tenacity," says Phillips. "One of her big values was helping other people. She was always concerned about an underserved population."

Riopelle began shaping an organization for female cancer survivors who lacked financial resources. She focused on offering individualized care, whether the needs were emotional, physical, spiritual, psychological or social.

She named the foundation for her mother, Mary Maguire Riopelle, who taught her 11 children (Maureen being the youngest) that with privilege comes responsibility. Maureen describes her mother as a graceful, dignified woman who battled chronic lymphocytic leukemia the last 12 years of her life.

Just before the organization was officially formed, Maureen's father, Rheo, died. Two days later, the sister diagnosed with leukemia at age 45 learned her cancer was in remission. (The brother diagnosed with melanoma at age 56 had successful surgery and has had no recurrences.)

Riopelle knew it would be difficult to find outside funding, at least initially, for a new foundation. To get it up and running, she tapped the inheritance she received from her father and dipped into her own savings.

"If this falls apart," she says, "at least I'll know I tried."

Eight weeks before the retreat, Riopelle drives to Camp Kern to meet with Angie and Emily Thorman, a mother and daughter team who will lead sessions on equine-assisted therapy.

"The horses are amazingly healing," Angie Thorman, a social worker, says. "They seem to know intuitively what people need."

Riopelle's understanding of survivors' needs was born of personal experience.

"In a lot of respects I sort of sleepwalked through life, and then I got cancer," she says, standing in a horse barn.

"It made me wake up, (and ask): 'Am I living the life I want to live? Am I doing what I want to do?'"

She wants other survivors to ask those questions. And to know that an organization exists to help them not just survive, but thrive.

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volunteers to help with the October retreat and with administrative matters; a photographer for retreat weekend and practitioners (Pilates, yoga, massage and other skills) to participate in upcoming retreats.

Information: 513-576-6780;
www.marymaguirefoundation.org.



Retreat

All 40 spots are filled for "From Surviving to Thriving," the Oct.13-15 retreat at Camp Kern sponsored by Mary's Circle of Hope/The Mary Maguire Foundation. More than a dozen facilitators will lead sessions on holistic health topics. A second retreat is planned for spring, but a date has not been set.



Equine-assisted therapy is one of the activities planned.

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