

Shop owners promote early detection of ovarian cancer



Photo by Sarah Gatzke

Ilene Epstein, Marcie Brawer and Sandy Gradman, co-owners of The Studio in Coolidge Corner, are all too familiar with ovarian cancer; Gradman was diagnosed in 2001 and has been tumor-free since undergoing treatment that year. The trio are now urging women and doctors to pay more attention to early warning signs.

By Jessica Scarpati/Staff writer
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Brookline -

Carol Lipsey remembers she was bloated — and the not the usual that-time-of-the-month bloated. More like nine-months-pregnant bloated.

But she was in her early 60s, after all, so she trusted her gastroenterologist when he told her she had developed irritable bowel syndrome.

Though when her health worsened and doctors couldn't ever give her an appointment, Lipsey got her sentence handed to her at the emergency room in April 2005: stage 4 ovarian cancer.

Lipsey, a sales associate at a Coolidge Corner retail mainstay, [The Studio](#), got angry that her early symptoms were dismissed; but it's her bosses who are getting even.

Just three months after the medical community officially acknowledged early warning signs of ovarian cancer, the three women at the helm of The Studio are seizing the airwaves, print media and Internet to raise awareness about those symptoms.

"This is absurd. It's incomprehensible that there is a way to detect this and doctors are not doing anything," said Sandy Gradman, a co-owner of the boutique, who has been tumor-free for six years after learning she had ovarian cancer in 2001.

Now, the St. Paul Street resident is grabbing attention for the cause as one of three faces on a public service announcement airing locally during commercials breaks on "The Today Show," NESN, "The Oprah Winfrey

Show” and “Live with Regis and Kelly.”

“I didn’t have any trouble talking to the camera because I was feeling the passion,” said Gradman, who filmed a 15-second and 30-second clip this summer with a 31-year-old woman and 6-year-old girl — both cancer survivors as well.

‘It became like a plague’

According to the American Cancer Society, white women over the age of 55 are at highest risk for developing ovarian cancer.

The nonprofit predicts 22,430 new cases of ovarian cancer will be diagnosed in the United States in 2007, accounting for 3 percent of all cancers in women.

Massachusetts is among the eight states with the highest rate of ovarian cancer diagnoses, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Data shows 14.3 women of every 100,000 women in the state developed ovarian cancer in 2003

Ovarian cancer:

Know the warning signs

Although the signs seem common, health officials advise women who experience one or more of these symptoms for at least three weeks to talk to their doctors about the possibility of ovarian cancer:

- Abdominal pressure, swelling, discomfort (clothes fit too tightly)
- Nausea, indigestion or gas
- Urinary or bowel problems: urinary frequency, constipation or diarrhea
- Abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge
- Unusual fatigue or fever
- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Pain: back pain or pain during intercourse

Source: Ovarians for the Cure

On the national scale, the American Cancer Society states a woman has a 1 in 67 chance of developing ovarian cancer; she has a 1 in 95 chance of dying from it.

In light of the staggering statistics, Gradman said she is not deterred from reaching out in any way she and her colleagues, Ilene Epstein and Marcie Brawer, are able.

“If anything, it makes you even more committed,” said Gradman, who works with the local nonprofit Ovarians for the Cure. “Once you have cancer, it’s a very natural thing to want to give back.”

Last week, she also filmed a segment for “About Health” with Jeanne Blake, a medical program that airs on cable stations in Boston and 15 other cities across the country.

Still reeling from another member of The Studio family being diagnosed with ovarian cancer — Lipsey, 64, is in remission, but doctors are wary to give her a clean bill of health — the women said they found out about a customer who was recently diagnosed.

Owning a store that caters to women and being there for nearly three decades

with a loyal customer base, the trio watched the often-fatal disease sink its teeth into friends and clients.

“Customers that once came don’t come back because of cancer,” said Epstein, a Parkman Street resident. “It became like a plague.”

Fighting for awareness

Already promoting awareness on the airwaves, the three women also decided to host “Shop to Stop,” a charity event at the boutique this week until Sept. 21, donating a percentage of all sales to Ovarians for the Cure.

They also enlisted 58 local businesses — including Fire Opal, Float, Lady Grace, Mint Julep Simon’s Shoes and Velvet Ribbon in Brookline — to purchase an ad in the Sept. 16 Boston Globe to promote early detection of ovarian cancer.

“I think people appreciate the idea of ‘people who sell clothes’ doing something,” Epstein said. “You have to just do something, and we felt we could.”

In addition to arming women with knowledge, The Studio owners hope doctors will become more receptive to their patients as well — and that cases like Lipsey’s don’t go untreated until at a crisis point.

“Our biggest hope is it will create an awareness that didn’t exist before,” Gradman said.

“I’m adamant about these doctors. They’re on the front line,” Epstein added. “It could be the difference between stage 1, 2, 3 and 4.”

Meanwhile, Lipsey hoped other women would learn from her story.

“Know your own body. If something doesn’t feel right, you have to fight and get the doctor to go over it,” she said. “Be ware of that, and fight for yourself — because nobody else will.”

To learn more about ovarian cancer, Ovarians for the Cure and The Studio, and to make a donation, visit www.ovationsfortheCure.org.

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