

Survivors of breast cancer come out in style

By MEG BARONE
Correspondent

NORWALK — Susan Santangelo celebrated her life and that of many other breast cancer survivors in grand style on Sunday, at the ninth annual Breast Cancer Survival Center Celebrate Life Fashion Show and Brunch at the Shore and Country Club.

Santangelo has always celebrated life, even during her cancer treatment in 1998, showing up for her last chemotherapy appointment in a silver limousine, wearing a feather boa and accompanied by dear friends. Less than a year later, the former Fairfield resident was helping other cancer survivors, post treatment, find reasons to celebrate their lives too through the creation of her BCSC, a nonprofit organization based at The Women's Center at Norwalk Community College.

The BCSC provides education and support to survivors and their families and is the only program in Connecticut dedicated exclusively to post-treatment issues.

"Susan does something that no one else does for women post treatment. She nurtures them with information and emotional support and she reaches out to women of all ages," said Marilyn Moore, executive director of the Witness Project, a breast and cervical cancer education program for black women, based in Bridgeport.

Each year, Celebrate Life features about a dozen models, most of whom are breast cancer survivors, modeling clothing from Talbot's.

This year's models included two survivors of other forms of the disease, including Patty Loux, of Stratford.

Among the male models from the Gedney Agency in Fairfield was David Menna,



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Renee Janssen greets a friend in the crowd as she models an outfit at the Celebrate Life! fashion show and brunch at the Shore and Country Club in East Norwalk Sunday.

of Scarsdale, N.Y., who wore a pink tie as he escorted models through the crowd of about 150 people; and Joshua Gay, who escorted his mother, Kim Gay.

Like most of the women in the show, Suzanne Barry, of Trumbull, a nine-year survivor, was modeling for the first time. "It was great, great fun," she said.

"We've all been through the same battle. We've been in the trenches and all understand and appreciate each other," she said.

Mary Ann Wasil Nilan, a former professional actress and model from Milford, and a four-year survivor, started her own organization to fight against breast cancer, The Get in Touch Foundation, but thought it was important to support BCSC just as BCSC supports women.

In fact, Santangelo referred to it as "survivors helping survivors."

"Women are forces for good. Women know how to take care of each other," Nilan said.

Lenore Aaron, director of special needs at Soleil Toile, a lingerie shop in Westport, called BCSC "one of the most heart-warming groups of women I've ever been involved with." Aaron said the group is non-threatening, the women who participate are upbeat and they don't belabor what's happened to them.

"Their attitude is, 'I may have cancer, but cancer doesn't have me.' Susan is an inspiration to everyone," Aaron said.

Model Carmen McPherson, of Bridgeport, a two-year survivor of breast cancer, applauds Santangelo's

efforts. "We need to keep the issue of breast cancer on the surface so it's not forgotten because we have far too many women who have been diagnosed, as well as being misdiagnosed," said McPherson, whose cancer was initially misdiagnosed.

"I was told it was a cyst and to come back in four months. If we can send a man to the moon we can cure breast cancer," she said.

Proceeds from the luncheon will increase the number of scholarships BCSC provides for its annual retreat.

"We're trying to offer more scholarships for retreats because the economy is bad and we want to make it easy for people to attend. The retreat is the only thing we charge for. Everything else is free," Santangelo said.



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Adair Heitmann models an outfit at the Celebrate Life! fashion show and brunch at the Shore and Country Club in East Norwalk Sunday. The event, which also included a live auction, benefits the Breast Cancer Survival Center.



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Lisa De Asi models an outfit at the Celebrate Life! fashion show and brunch at the Shore and Country Club in East Norwalk Sunday.

The Breast Cancer Survival Center will hold a candlelight vigil at Milford City Hall on Oct. 28 at 6:30 p.m. Luminaries will be dedicated in honor and memory of loved ones affected by cancer.

"We don't differentiate be-

cause they are all forever in our hearts," said Marianne Laska, a nine-year breast cancer survivor from Milford, whose husband Robert Laska, publisher of the *Connecticut Post*, served as host for the sixth year.