Moving Forward Together Program

Jean Sauco, a Coventry cancer survivor, participates in program that has helped her recover

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When Jean Sauco was in recovery from her treatment from breast cancer, exercise and meal planning were the last things on her mind.

A proposal from a medical team from Miriam Hospital, however, changed all that.

The 64-year-old Coventry resident is now in remission and adhering to a full fitness program. She said that she has the Moving Forward Together study program and the medical team at Miriam Hospital to thank for both.

Sauco was 61 when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer. She had surgery in 2009 and underwent a lengthy chemotherapy program, but has, to date, managed to remain cancer free.

Just a little over a year ago, while she was still in recovery from treatment from her diagnosis, Sauco said that someone from Miriam Hospital contacted her and asked her if she would be willing to participate in a 12-week study program, formally known as Moving Forward Together. She said that the person who asked her to participate simply described the program as “a study that was being implemented to determine how physical activity would affect the recovery of women undergoing breast cancer treatment.”

At first, Sauco said, she didn’t really feel up for the task; physical activity, she said, was the last thing on her mind, but looking back on the opportunity, she said that she is thrilled that she got on board.

“A after going through chemotherapy, I was feeling kind of blah, but they said that this program would help me to work back up to my normal activity levels and strength,” Sauco said.

“They assigned a mentor to me who talked to me once a week on the telephone and she helped me to set goals and she also kept me committed to meeting them.”

The idea of the study program, according to Dr. Bernardine M. Pinto, Ph.D., who spearheaded the study, is to validate the “growing evidence that physical activity interventions can contribute to improved mood, quality of life, reduced fatigue and increased vigor among cancer survivors” and to see if trained volunteers would be able to disseminate the support and information needed to meet such tasks.

Prior to this study, such interventions had been implemented by research professionals in a controlled setting and studied by professionals but this pilot study, according to information provided by Pinto, was the first step in disseminating research programs by training community volunteers.

The so-called “mentor” that Sauco mentioned supported her during her 12-week involvement in the research study, was one of those “community volunteers.” She and several other female volunteers came from a pool of people provided by the American Cancer Society’s Research To Recovery volunteers.

These volunteers are all breast cancer survivors themselves and volunteered to go through additional intensive trainings from the American Cancer Society in order to provide emotional and informational support to other breast cancer survivors that were willing to participate in this study.

Pinto embarked on this study in 2009 and began recruiting volunteers at the end of that year. So far, she said, there are 13 trained community volunteers in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Each of those volunteers have aided in the support of 27 women to date, Sauco among them.

Pinto said that the volunteers make weekly calls to the study participants to check in with them and provide various forms of support to the participants during their weekly contacts.

She said that emotional support as well as informational tips is often times exchanged as well as simply acting as a peer motivator.

Although the data collected from these study participants and community volunteers is still being gathered by Pinto, she said that the initial findings are “incredibly promising.”

“The pilot data is very encouraging,” Pinto said. “I wanted to know if it would be possible for trained volunteers to serve as coaches to deliver such a program and at first I thought to myself, ‘we are expecting quite a bit from these volunteers,’ but as the data comes in, I am finding that I am amazed by the coaches.

“The feedback that I am gathering from the coaches is that the participants are benefiting from their support and that even the coaches are feeling that this partnerships is helping them, so that is very gratifying news,” Pinto said.

Sauco said that she found that to be the case for both herself and her mentor, Jackie.

“At first I just started off doing a routine for something like 10 minutes a day; simple things like walking on the treadmill or using the exercise bike,” Sauco said. “I was also walking around the mall to meet the goals that I had set with Jackie, but then I started to increase my goals and I started to do the bike
path, then I joined a gym and now I am taking a Tai Chi and even a dance class.

"I think that at first you don't really realize how de-conditioned you've become because of the effects of the chemo, but when you try to do things and you see how tired it makes you, you start to realize it and that can really bring you down," Sauco said. "But having Jackie there as a mentor and knowing that you had to check in with her just kind of made me stick to the goals that we had set, not doing it really wasn't even an option because I knew she would ask me what I had done."

Sauco said that her mentor also gave her ideas, helpful information and often times even just listened, all very important characteristics of the community volunteer, according to Pinto.

Pinto said that she will continue to recruit more community volunteers and participants for this study as well as collect the data from the partners to see what the findings reveal. If the trend of positive results continues to be the yielding trend, then she said that the next step will be to inquire what the cost of implementing such a program for breast cancer survivors would be as well as expanding it to other community based programs that support cancer survivors.

There is much more information about this pilot program as well as other studies pertaining to breast cancer and the various studies and information pertaining to the diagnosis on the lifepsan website, www.lifespan.org.

This month during Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Pinto is hopeful to spread awareness of the continued efforts to support the many breast cancer survivors like Sauco who are committed to beating this life threatening diagnosis.

Jean Sauco (center), with her daughter Marlene and granddaughters Marissa, at left, and Mia, at right, has been participating in the Move Forward Together Program and has achieved more stamina and energy from sticking with it.