

LOCAL NEWS

A cancer survivor comes to A-B to inspire others

By *Michelle Apuzzio / Correspondent*
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Her exuberance and vitality as she chatted enthusiastically about her desire to take her father to his roots in Avelino, Italy, belied the effects of the disease which almost claimed her life eight years ago.

What's most frightening about Annie Toglia's battle with breast cancer is the fact that, without her persistence, professional connections and personal support, she might not be having this conversation with cafeteria staff at Caritas St. Elizabeth's Medical Center where she participated in the "Beyond Breast Cancer" conference last week.

Toglia was well aware of how breast cancer tears through some families. Her grandmother and two aunts had died from the disease, and her mother also underwent treatment for a tumor. In fact, just before Toglia's diagnosis, her sister said, "You're going to Dr. Gomez the week before Easter? Don't pull that Easter cancer stunt," referring to their mother's diagnosis on the same holiday.

Because of her family history, she knew she was at high risk for the disease, so she took the necessary precautions and developed fairly strict health habits. She realizes now that she was "living the early part of my life to prevent breast cancer."

Twenty years ago, before it was chic to do yoga and eat whole foods, Toglia stuck to an organic diet and regularly received acupuncture treatments. Sadly, while her regimen helped her to survive breast cancer, it wasn't able to surmount her predisposition for the disease.

But getting to that diagnosis was a struggle, an unfair one considering the strength Toglia needed for the battle following it. Despite several examinations and being in a group for high-risk women, Toglia's diagnosis was missed for years until she reached late-stage breast cancer. The doctor who finally diagnosed her said, "Your cancer was screaming at me," after he read her mammography results.





After her diagnosis, Toglia found ways to bypass lengthy waiting lists at leading physicians' offices and leveraged political connections to navigate a health-care system that didn't always want to cover the treatments she sought. After two mastectomies (one was prophylactic), stem cell transplants and extensive therapy, Toglia is in remission.

Although she has since settled lawsuits with two large New York hospitals (that she prefers not to mention), her initial anger hasn't defined her life.

"I guess you could say I'm a breast cancer advocate," said Toglia, a medical exercise specialist. Her book, "Staying Abreast, Rehabilitation Exercises for Breast Cancer Surgery," teaches women how to maintain an appropriate level of fitness during various stages of breast cancer and treatment, information Toglia found lacking when she was a patient. At conferences, Toglia addresses a range of professionals from physical therapists to massage therapists to yoga instructors on topics such as secondary complications of breast cancer treatment, such as lymphedema, and how to get clients to disclose if they've had breast cancer. She concludes with a demonstration of exercises for women with breast cancer.

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Her success in instituting Lymphadema Awareness Day in New York, her home state, evolved from her drive to bring awareness to breast cancer issues. Currently, Toglia is working towards legislative changes that will ensure women are less likely to experience the negligence she did.

"Very few states have laws governing who reads mammograms," she said. "Most mammograms are read by general radiologists rather than breast cancer specialists."

Toglia is urging states to set guidelines for training and certification. Until then, she advises women to be proactive with their own health.

Toglia credits her access to the best doctors and treatments as a key to her successful battle against breast cancer, but she said, "I don't think I should be privileged. I want everybody to get the same treatments that saved me."

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