

# Cancer battle leads to a new career

*Westport woman transitions from personal trainer to helping others with emotions and grief*

BY KATHLEEN TROOST-CRAMER

A devastating diagnosis turned into a life's calling for Westporter Nicky D'Abrosca.

In 2005, she recalled, "I just wasn't feeling well. It had been a while, and I avoided it because I was working two jobs and taking college courses. I figured I was just tired."

But when she saw a doctor, a routine process of ruling things out resulted in a diagnosis of colon cancer.

"Within a week I was scheduled to have surgery, chemotherapy and all that," Ms. D'Abrosca said.

Even after her cancerous tumor was removed, PET scans showed that the cancer had spread to Ms. D'Abrosca's liver. Chemotherapy treatments followed at Roger Williams Medical Center in Providence on a schedule of every other Monday for six months. Ms. D'Abrosca went home from each treatment with an IV drip that had to remain for 48 hours.

"Then I recovered for a week and a half and did it all over again," she said.

A blood clot in her liver also meant that Ms. D'Abrosca had to be on the blood thinner Coumadin for a year.

While there's no good time to receive such a diagnosis, the timing of Ms. D'Abrosca's medical news seemed especially ill-fated. She had just earned her personal trainer certification, was an avid softball player and an active outdoors type.

"My doctors were wonderful," Ms. D'Abrosca said. "They never said 'You only have this much time.' It was like I had a bad case of the flu and it was going to be treated. They never made me feel like I didn't have a chance, even though I found out much later that it was close."

One of the worst parts of her ordeal wasn't physical, but emotional, Ms. D'Abrosca said.

"At the time it was just, this is what I've been handed and this is what I have to do," she recalled. "But as the chemo went on, I was feeling worse, I couldn't do the things I wanted to do, I couldn't help the family."

But her family and friends formed "a huge support group," she said, helping to get her then-9-year-old daughter to school, visiting and giving Ms. D'Abrosca rides to watch softball games.

Ms. D'Abrosca has been in remission since the end of 2005, when her chemotherapy treatments came to an end. But that was just the beginning of a whole new life.



Nicky D'Abrosca (right) with a couple of the volunteers in the Hope Hospice program in Providence.

## Volunteer stint leads to a new career

She began volunteering for Hope Hospice & Palliative Care of Rhode Island, particularly at Camp Braveheart, a two-day summer camp for children who have lost a loved one.

"Through that I met a ton of great people," Ms. D'Abrosca said. "The staff were so friendly and outgoing as I told my story. You could tell people really wanted you here."

"Through self-reflection, I realized that was something I wanted to do," she said.

When a full-time employment position at Hope Hospice came up, Ms. D'Abrosca was in the midst of phasing out her business, TKO Fitness in Westport.

"I had to go back to work full time, and I realized I had to be passionate and like the people I worked with," she said. "The position at Hope Hospice came up at the exact time I decided to phase out the business. It's a lot of time running a busi-

ness; it's hard. I wanted to get back to a regular Monday to Friday schedule. And financially I needed the income."

Ms. D'Abrosca is now a full-time volunteer manager for Hope Hospice, and still works at Camp Braveheart. The camp will come to Massachusetts for the first time as a one-day event in August.

Ms. D'Abrosca recruits volunteers to provide respite for Hope Hospice patients, visiting to keep patients company, helping with shopping, providing spiritual care, making activity blankets for dementia patients who need mental stimulation or providing administrative help in the Hope office.

"A volunteer has to really have a passion to want to work with people at the end of their life," Ms. D'Abrosca said.

She returned to softball about four years ago, and continues to work out at the gym three or four mornings a week.

When asked how she got through her cancer diagnosis and treatment emo-

tionally and mentally, Ms. D'Abrosca said, "it's all about mindfulness."

"What is going on in the moment?" she asked rhetorically. "What's the hand I've been dealt? I could get mad and blame everybody and be miserable, or I could hit it head on. I went through a lot of up and down phases like that. It's much easier being as positive as you can and as mindful as you can of what's going on in the moment."

"I think in today's society we tend to look at the negative," Ms. D'Abrosca said. "We need to accept the situation as it is. I did that through reading books, counseling. I had really good support from my family. I think if you surround yourself with positive people it's easier to be positive, but it comes down to your own mindset. It's choice. It's all about reaction and how you deal with it. People say, how can you have a positive experience at the end of life? Well, you can."

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## Index

Around Town.....8  
At the Library.....10  
Obituaries.....12  
Opinion.....6  
Seniors.....8