

## Dragonfly helps breast cancer survivors find their 'new normal'?



**By Brock Weir**

'I'm just going to carry on and get back to my world.'

That is the thought that went through Bonnie Robinson's mind when she finished breast cancer treatment. Taking about two weeks post-treatment for some rest, Ms. Robinson says she was 'determined to get her life back.'

But just what was that life after she fought cancer and won?

'Finding your new normal sounds so easy,' she says. 'It wasn't the same because I wasn't the same. I needed help and support to find that new normal.'

A few years earlier, neighbours Manon La Brecque and Laura Stornelli found themselves at a similar crossroads. Neighbours for nearly 15 years, the two York Region women helped each other through the treatment phase, but once it was all over, they found themselves asking, 'Now what?'

They joined forces to answer that very question with Dragonfly Wellness Retreat, a semi-annual weekend providing fellowship, support, and health options for women recovering from breast cancer.

'This is when I had the most questions,' says Manon of being told to check back in at the hospital in a year following her treatment.

'I am facing all the side effects of treatments. Laura and I were exchanging information about, what do you do when starting up exercising again? What should I eat? How do we put our lives together? I realised we were fortunate enough to go through this together in some ways and I thought there must be women out there who are completely isolated.'

Finding similar programs out there, but only in the city, the women came together to found something closer to home, laying the foundations for their program, which brings in experts and treatment providers for three day weekends, in Roaches Point.

'Dragonfly had changed my world,' says Ms. Robinson. 'It provided me with the glue to put back my shattered world.'

It recently provided the same support for local musician Bonnie Kraft, who began her cancer fight last year. Now a survivor, Ms. Kraft says she learned there was a significant gap in providing treatments to help women transition back into everyday life.

'What these two women have created with their vision has made a positive difference in the lives of so many women,' says Ms. Kraft. 'As we struggle with the 'What now?' of post-treatment and all the challenges we might face along the way, the retreat was an absolutely amazing experience and words can't really express how much benefit I got from it.'

'There was the emotional support, the learning, the connections, and the caring and compassionate atmosphere. All those I will cherish and carry with me into the future.'

Initially, Ms. Kraft says going to a retreat 'in such closed quarters' with women wasn't at all in her comfort zone. Guarded at home during her treatment as she didn't want to burden those she loved with 'all my thoughts and day to day?', she was not used to opening up. Once there, however, it was a different story.

'Dragonfly is a little bit more specific with the post-treatment needs,' says Laura, noting the cancer centre at Southlake Regional Health Centre offers a transition program, but it is open to everyone. 'I don't want to talk about losing my breast and everything that that brings to the party in a room full of men, or people who will say, 'I don't get what she's talking about.' Women need a safe environment to open up about what this is going to do to my marriage, what this is going to do to my sex life, and the amount of

young women we're seeing now [with breast cancer] would scare the crap out of you.?

Adds Manon: ?We have a lot of questions like what does it mean to survive this? What does it mean to continue living on a daily basis with the idea this cancer could always come back at any time? To deal with that on your own is very difficult. When we first created Dragonfly we wanted to inspire and empower women with information, with a community, with a tribe of breast cancer survivors.?

Those were exactly the questions Ms. Robinson says she wanted answered. While she says the transition treatment she received at the hospital was ?fabulous? she was left wondering how to live again ?with the little cancer man on my shoulder.?

Now, she's equipped. The former salesperson of medical equipment took things a step further and is now a fundraiser for Doane House Hospice in Newmarket.

A weekend at Dragonfly costs \$150 per woman, with opportunities for full sponsorship if this cost is a burden. That \$150 is about 25 per cent of what it actually costs, but costs are kept low by fundraisers keeping in mind the exorbitant costs faced by families when a loved one is battling cancer.

Funds are raised three times a year with yoga in March, a tea party event in May to coincide with Mother's Day and, just last month, a ?Pink Your Drink? fundraiser. Next month, there will be a fourth at the Aurora Cultural Centre, with beaded bracelets made by Dragonfly alumni, on December 10.

?We want to knock [the idea this is a spa weekend] right on its head at the outset,? says Laura. ?There are always one or two women who hold back with the sharing and the joining in until they feel a little bit more comfortable. I have women in my social circle that know exactly what I do with Dragonfly and they are like, ?It is not for me.' It is a personal choice. Some women want to get it off their chest and hear other women's experiences. Other women have it in their head that it is over and they're not going to be revisiting.

?I just wish I could hit it home to them that we're not about all the horrible things that have happened over the last eight to 12 months. It is all about going forward.?