

COHASSET MARINER

FRIDAY, AUGUST 7, 2009

Garden makes a difference to Cohasset breast cancer patient

By Becca Shuman

To say Cohasset resident Jean O'Halloran's life in the past few years has been a whirlwind is an understatement. She was living in California with her fiancé when she was accepted at Harvard's graduate school of education. They packed up and returned to Massachusetts, were married and O'Halloran finished school. She gave birth to a son and a daughter. She was working as a book editor. Her family had just moved into their new home in Cohasset. Life was good. O'Halloran's mother, Joanne Hopkinson of Weymouth, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007, was responding well to treatment. O'Halloran's life was turned upside down in the summer of 2008 when she felt a lump and learned she had the same type of breast cancer as her mother. She was 32 years old. Her son was three and her daughter was nine months old.

O'Halloran picked up a Hope in Bloom postcard at Cohasset Village Day last fall. She contacted the Dedham based non-profit, which plants indoor, patio and outdoor gardens free of charge at the homes of

Massachusetts' breast cancer patients. O'Halloran asked if the organization could spruce up her mother's garden. O'Halloran saw this as a way to thank her mom, who cared for Sean and Abby every day for six weeks while O'Halloran received her radiation treatments. Knowing her children were in good hands while she was at the hospital gave O'Halloran peace of mind. When Hope In Bloom learned O'Halloran was also a breast cancer patient, she too was asked if she would like a garden.

Since Massachusetts has such a short growing season and O'Halloran requested a vegetable garden, hers was planted before her mom's. Normally, Hope in Bloom gardens are funded solely by private contributions but Chris Kennedy, who owns Kennedy's Country Gardens of Scituate and recently moved to Cohasset with his family, offered to help make O'Halloran's and Hopkinson's gardens possible. He donated the designs as well as the vegetables and plants. A few weeks ago, Kennedy arrived at O'Halloran's house with a truck filled with all the supplies for her garden. O'Halloran's son, Sean, armed with his plastic shovel was all



Jean O'Halloran, right, of Cohasset poses with her mother, Joanne Hopkinson of Weymouth, in O'Halloran's new garden. Both are being treated for breast cancer.



Jean O'Halloran with her son, Sean, 4 who holds a tomato.

set to plant and waited for the action to begin. Once Roy, their Golden Retriever, saw what was going on, he happily joined in the digging. The chickens that live next door stopped by to see what was happening. Kennedy oversaw the installation and worked alongside Hope in Bloom volunteers Greer Underwood of Hingham and Michele Tasiopoulos of Norwell.

Hopkinson and her husband, Fred, were there too to lend a hand and keep everyone hydrated with cold drinks.

When Kennedy was asked why he chose to become involved, he said: "I know what a difference a garden can make for someone. I am always willing to help a neighbor." By the end of the summer, he will have donated his time and materials for five South Shore gardens this season.

O'Halloran chose the same Massachusetts' General Hospital caregivers as her mother. She wasn't scared because she had watched her mother sail through treatment. At one point, they received chemotherapy at the same time and sat together with their husbands during the procedure. Both women want to commend everyone on their medical team for their compassion and hands on care.

Word of O'Halloran's diagnosis traveled fast. The Cohasset community embraced her and helped her family through the ordeal. O'Halloran said, "My cancer brought out the best in everyone." Strangers have now become friends. When her son started pre-school in the fall of 2008, fellow mothers at the Carriage House Nursery School got wind of O'Halloran's situation and sprang into action. They set up a committee of parents and neighbors to provide and deliver meals to the O'Halloran household. Doug Bennet, owner of the Body Studio, met her at 6 a.m.

"My cancer brought out the best in everyone"

— Jean O'Halloran



Chris Kennedy, owner of Kennedy's Country Gardens of Scituate, digs in.

every Friday before her chemo for personal training sessions that kept her strong during treatment. Jessica Fitzpatrick of Jo's Angels surprised her with a gift certificate for yoga classes at Balance Studio in the Village. Children at their church, First Parish of Cohasset, made her a gift basket filled with get-well cards. A CCD class of teenagers showed up at their house on a Saturday morning to rake leaves.

Her husband Brian's co-workers pitched in with a year's worth of housecleaning services. They also formed a team to run the Race for the Cure last September. In fact, O'Halloran plans on running it this fall and Hopkinson is thinking about walking the route.

Hopkinson, a nurse's assistant, has lived and gardened in Weymouth for almost four decades. She worked out a novel way to add flowers to her yard when she was undergoing treatment. Fred dug the holes and she would plant. It kept her involved, allowed her to sneak in some exercise and gave her a sense of accomplishment. This month Fred can sit back and



The garden takes shape.

watch when Hopkinson's garden is enhanced compliments of Kennedy's Country Gardens of Scituate.

Hope in Bloom founder Roberta Hershon said the gardens reduce stress and anxiety, lower blood pressure, and increase serotonin levels in the body. Because of these factors, patients are more receptive to medical intervention. O'Halloran remarked, "It's fun to wonder where the original vegetable garden was when the house was built in the early 1800s. All I know is almost 200 years later, history repeats itself as we grow pesticide free food. I'm looking forward to learning more about organic gardening." A few days after the garden was planted, O'Halloran shared the fact Abby now wakes up in the morning and excitedly shouts from her crib, "Go see garden!" Abby's favorite fruit is watermelon, and she likes to check the yard to see if theirs is growing. Sean has his eye on the tomatoes while Brian is eagerly anticipating the hot chili peppers. "As O'Halloran and Hopkinson stood in O'Halloran's kitchen admiring the garden, Hopkinson said, "Sharing breast cancer is one mother daughter experience I don't recommend. She went on to say "I am pleased we are both thriving and can compare notes as we watch our gardens do the same."

To learn more about Hope in Bloom or to make a donation, visit www.hopeinbloom.org.



Joanne Hopkinson serves refreshments.



Michele Tasiopoulos of Norwell plants herbs.