

December 2009

Sue Ann Says: Make a Difference...Instill Hope in Others

The holiday season has always been a time for me to reflect on my life. I'm so grateful for the love of my family, my work and my health. Oh, believe me, my life has had its ups and downs (whose doesn't!), but I know that whatever comes my way, I have hope – that little word that means so much to so many of us. As women, it's almost second nature to not only have hope, but to instill hope in others.

I think this story, my daughter's favorite, says it all. Perhaps you've heard it: There was a young man walking down a deserted beach just before dawn. In the distance he saw a frail, old man. As he approached the old man, he saw him picking up stranded starfish and throwing them back into the sea. The young man gazed in wonder as the old man again and again threw the small starfish from the sand to the water. He had to ask, "Old man, why do you spend so much energy doing what seems to be such a waste of time?" The old man explained that the stranded starfish would die if left in the morning sun. "BUT there must be thousands of beaches and millions of starfish? How can you make a difference?" The old man looked at the small starfish in his hand and as he threw it to the safety of the sea, he said, "I made a difference to that one"!

That is what I ask you to think about...throwing back starfish...making a difference...instilling hope...one person at a time.

Fifteen years ago I heard those dreaded words, "You have cancer". It was quite a shock! I never thought I would get breast cancer, even though I had watched my mother die from the disease. I was vigilant about getting my mammograms and doing breast self-exams. This wasn't supposed to happen to me.

But I was not given a choice. I was not asked. Breast cancer was thrust into my life and into the lives of my family. Your whole life changes upon the words "you have cancer". It's amazing how certain things in your life become instantly clear, when you hear those words. And yet, my head was swimming with a mixture of thoughts and emotions. Good grief, I had three young children, a husband and two careers! How do you move from the panic of a cancer diagnosis to a hopeful future?

I quickly made the decision to fight this disease and live. Hopefulness filled my thoughts. The decision to work with the medical care system and cooperate with the advice of the doctors was a daily decision that gave me hope. I didn't fight the battle alone, of course. I had family and friends, absolute pillars of strength who supported me and gave me hope. I had talented and courageous doctors who gave me hope by treating me early and aggressively so that I might survive.

And, since I was the First Lady at the time, I had the people of Wisconsin. Their prayers and more than 3,500 cards and letters gave me hope to heal faster from within.

Most importantly, I had a God who, by his grace, spared me from a disease that had the potential to rob me of everything – my loved ones, my profession, my mobility and, ultimately, my life.

Hope allowed me as a cancer patient to see that my role was to participate fully in the cancer treatments and fight the disease. The medical team's job was to pick the right treatment to kill cancer. My job was to recover from treatments. As Lance Armstrong once said, "Hope is a belief that a positive outcome lies ahead."

An initial diagnosis of a life threatening disease is disorienting—and can be especially overwhelming if the statistics look bad. In my travels across the state, I spoke with women diagnosed with various diseases. One woman I know was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer—a disease with an extremely poor survival rate. When people told her that not many survive this horrible disease, she said, ‘Well, guess what? You’re now talking to the first one.’ Yes, statistics are important, but you are not a statistic, you are a real person.

I heard about another woman who was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. She said that her oncologist sat her down, patted her on the knee, and explained that she should come to grips with the fact that she was terminal. Well, she decided right then and there to change his perception. She already knew the gravity of the situation, but still wanted to hold on to hope. The next week she had a hat made and presented it to him as a gift. On the front it said, ‘I Am Terminal’ and on the back, ‘So are you.’ Several years later, she’s still living, and the hat continues to hang on her doctor’s office wall.

I once read that hope is a decision, not an emotion nor a feeling. There may be hopes inside of bigger hopes: hope for a cure, hope a scan goes OK, hope a transplant is free from complications, hope you stay stable, hope to see your daughter graduate from high school. Hope can come in the form of good treatment, a sunny day, and a peaceful death.

And now I know more than ever, that everything – your faith, family, home, rewarding career, happy children, grandchildren, and spouse – everything starts with a healthy woman. A healthy woman has the kind of strength that sustains a hope from which everything can be born.

I have an optimistic and hopeful friend who, when asked, “What are you doing?” responds by saying, “The impossible!” I like that answer because it’s what I believe a healthy woman can accomplish. And it’s one of the reasons why I started the Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation twelve years ago after my cancer diagnosis. My hope was to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential through education, connecting them to health resources and supporting women’s health research. Because when a woman has her health, she has hope, and when she has hope, she has everything.

I heard this poem at a breakfast a few weeks ago. It’s called “Dream Builder’s Affirmation” by Michal Wynn.

I will look beyond the problems...to the solutions.
I will look beyond the obstacles...to the opportunities.
I will look beyond the impossible...to the possibilities.
I will look beyond the darkness...to the light.
When others doubt...I will provide courage and inspiration.
When others quit...I will demonstrate strength and determination.
I cannot do everything...but I can do something.
What I can do...what I must do...I will.

Like the man with the starfish, make a difference, go out in the world and instill hope in others.
Remember, if you don’t have hope, what do you have?

Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Blessings to you during this holiday season,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sue Ann Thompson".

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.