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**KAT'S RIBBON OF HOPE
GIVING NEW MEANING
TO "C" CHANGE**

Photo by Ann Balderston-Glynn



Kat and Despina (L-R)

cover story
By Jean Daniels & Ann Balderston-Glynn



Kat with her husband George and son Xen at the inaugural benefit

Kat's Ribbon of Hope

Giving New Meaning to "C" Change



When Kat was diagnosed, I stopped everything, dropped my children with friends, and met my husband, my brother and sister-in-law at Kat and George's house. We huddled together and cried. Our biggest concern was, 'How do we tell mom and dad?'
—Despina Yarian, sister and co-founder of Kat's Ribbon of Hope, Inc.

When we think Greek, we think Olympians and goddesses. That inner strength and beauty etched into Greek DNA. Ancient culture aside, being Greek is all about family unity. So, when Katerina Dinias-Raptis, Kat for short, had to go into battle after being diagnosed with breast cancer, Kat's husband George, and her sister, Old Brookville resident Despina Yarian, put on their metaphorical armor, mustered that inner strength, and stepped right up beside her. Together the three became co-founders of Kat's Ribbon of Hope, Inc., a not-for-profit organization providing financial assistance to those who can't afford early detection and treatment services for breast cancer. Despina explains, "These individuals die at twice the rate of those who can afford medical attention. Our intent is to save lives by making critical information and services more accessible to those at risk."

Six years ago, Kat woke to a day like any other day, getting her toddler son Xenophon out of bed and her husband George off to work. During her morning routine, she felt a lump in her breast. Having a career in the pharmaceutical industry, she was proactive about health care. No one ever expects to hear those life-altering words, "You have breast cancer," but he heard they were. Despina remembers, "When Kat was diagnosed, I stopped

everything, dropped my children with friends, and met my husband, my brother and sister-in-law at Kat and George's house. We huddled together and cried. Our biggest concern was, 'How do we tell mom and dad?'" According to Kat, "Telling my parents was harder than hearing I had breast cancer." Her parents held it together in front of the girls, but a lot of crying took place behind closed doors. "We are a very close family," explains Despina. "Our parents came here from Greece and built a life from the ground up. They taught us to be strong. If faced with obstacles, you come together and help one another, and by the grace of God, anything can be overcome."

Kat, George and Despina spent many days at Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital. On one such day, they decided that Despina would be best suited to act as Kat's health care advocate given their parents' language barrier. During a group hug, George commented that there had to be a reason this happened to Kat. Kat remembers responding, "I feel like I was chosen to relay a message and take something so awful and make it good." Despina said, "OK, when you're back on your feet let's do something." That "something" would blossom into Kat's Ribbon of Hope. A Godsend to more than 1,050 women who have been directly treated through the organization's "patient navigator," a health care advocate resource. "The 'navigator' is the social worker who reaches out on behalf of the patient who can't afford certain services," says Despina. The core principle of patient navigation is to eliminate barriers to timely examinations, diagnoses and treatment.



George, Kat, former congressman Steve Israel, Dr. Harold Freeman and Despina (L-R)



George, Kat, Melina, Milton, Mom and Dad, Despina & Michael



Kat and Xen

"My mother always called me her petalouda' which means 'little butterfly' in Greek," says Kat. An endearment that would become the symbol for Kat's own transformative experience. Kat's diagnosis triggered a "butterfly effect" – a phenomenon whereby a localized change in a complex system can have large effects elsewhere. In short, Kat's breast cancer diagnosis led to the inception of Kat's Ribbon of Hope, generating far-reaching effects at so many levels. Despina recalls an ah-ha moment, "We were at the oncologist's office when a woman came in seeking chemo for aggressive stage 4 breast cancer but didn't have insurance. It got both of us thinking – what do people do without family holding them up or means to medical care?" Sadly, patients without means often die needlessly without an advocate to navigate the health care system for them.

Kat's Ribbon of Hope was established as a not-for-profit, at the end of that same year Kat was diagnosed, with help from former Congressman Steve Israel. Area hospitals have become beneficiaries of the organizations grant program. This year, Memorial Sloan Kettering, Weill Cornell Medical Center, The Feinstein Institute for Medical Research and the Adelpi Breast Cancer Program received support. Dee Dee Ricks, famous for the HBO documentary that followed her own breast cancer story, helped the sisters frame their vision for patient navigation. When the first fundraiser kicked-off, the esteemed Dr. Harold Freeman, founder of the Patient Navigation Institute was their keynote speaker. Their annual Golf Outing and Benefit Dinner takes place each fall at Nassau Country Club in Glen Cove, NY. Despina

describes the family turnout, "Our children love October because they know it's breast cancer awareness month, and it's when we host our fundraising benefit. Family, friends and junior volunteers come together to lend a helping hand with the event. Our boys sell breast cancer ribbons in school and raise awareness. It teaches our children to be philanthropic ambassadors and that's pretty great."

As Despina rattles off breast cancer statistics, the room starts to lose oxygen. "One in eight women will be diagnosed within their lifetime, 250,000 annually, and men are not excluded." On average, the organization donates \$200,000 a year to patient navigation and clinical research trials and, in the six years of operation, has raised over a \$1,000,000.

According to Kat, "When we were growing up our aunt had cancer. The 'C' word was never spoken. Women are no longer deterred from speaking out. It's good for our kids to grow up aware, and to show them that something positive can be born from adversity."

Kat's Ribbon of Hope is working toward "C" change by transforming lives regardless of means. The three founders, Kat, George and Despina, offer up a parting thought, "Life is precious and fleeting, try to do good every day, for your community, for society, for your fellow man. That's what we're trying to do." Find out more or donate at www.katsribbonofhope.com.