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Friends on a mission: Mel's Support Squad

Wednesday, March 16, 2011

By Sue Erickson
Connection Editor

Melissa "Mel" DeStefano is a mom that cherishes her children. She's a wife that adores her husband. She's a Life Skills teacher at Pottsgrove High School that loves her job. Her friends mean the world to her. She works, exercises regularly and runs her kids around to sports, after school activities and social outings.

And she also has MS.

Mel was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis – MS – in February of 2010.

"I felt a strange numbness in my face that wasn't going away," she said. "When it persisted, I decided to go to the doctor and get it checked out."

A series of tests later that ruled out other possibilities such as Bell's Palsy or a stroke, Mel's doctor confirmed that she had MS.

"Luckily, I was diagnosed relatively quickly," said Mel. "I immediately went on a mission to find out as much as I could about MS. The element of the unknown is the worst part of the disease."

She also told her family and friends.

"My friends were my immediate support system," she said. They gathered around and offered to help in any way they could, including watching my children for me."

"And they created a team to participate in the annual MS Walk," she said.

Two of Mel's closest friends, Jennie Sortino and Cathie Rubbo, quickly enlisted family and friends to join what has now become Mel's Support Squad.

More than 100 walkers strong, Mel's Support Squad walked in last year's MS Walk and were honored with the Diamond Team Award.

"The Diamond Team Award is presented to the team that places first as the Top Fundraising Team (for the Valley Forge walk), the Largest Team, Best Rookie Team and Most Team Spirit," Mel explained. "Not to mention that our team also raised more than \$10,000 for MS research!"

Mel said that although she suffered from fatigue – a symptom of the disease – and occasional "tingles," she felt pretty good.

Until Thanksgiving.

Mel woke up with the feeling that something was in her eye.

"The feeling that something was scratching my eye just wasn't going away," said Mel. "I never really gave it a second thought until my friends suggested that I get it checked out, just to be on the safe side."

That's when she found out that she had lost the vision in her eye.

Optic neuritis, the loss of vision in one eye, is another symptom of an MS "attack."

Tired of living with a "question mark over my head about this disease," Mel knew that it was time to see a specialist and get more definitive information and options. She sought out the expertise of the head of neurology at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and began the process of more tests, more MRIs and a spinal tap.

"That's when the doctor found a lesion on my spine," said Mel. "I knew it was time to start fighting this disease head-on."

After researching all the available treatments and medications, Mel and her husband decided that a daily regimen of injections would be the best course of action.

"I'm a walking pin cushion!" she laughed.

That sense of humor, along with the love of her family, friends, students and coworkers, help to keep Mel's spirits up. She also keeps as normal a routine as possible, although she does tire easily.

Her vision in the affected eye has returned, although she has a permanent blind spot as a result of the episode. She exercises as much as her body will allow, although when her nerves become "overheated," it causes pain, tingling and numbness in one of her legs and her feet.

"That's when I know that I've overdone it and it's time to slow down," she said.

Mel has added one new passion to her list of loves: Mel's Support Squad.

Mel's Support Squad hosted a scrapbooking fundraiser on Saturday. Scrapbooking enthusiasts from all over met at New Hanover United Methodist Church to share their love of scrapbooking, share techniques and win door prizes, all while supporting MS research.

"Jennie and Cathie put everything together for today's event," said Mel. "They are forces to be reckoned with when it comes to fundraising and organizing events!"

In addition to the scrapbooking fundraiser, Mel's Support Squad will be hosting a bake sale on Sunday, April 17 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Suloman's Dairy in Gilbertsville and selling the "Cooking to Fight MS" cookbook, all to raise money for the big event the MS Walk on Sunday, May 1.

"We invite everyone to attend our fundraisers and especially to be part of the walk," said Mel. "The more people we can educate about the disease, the greater the chance of finding a cure."

Mel's Support Squad is also asking area businesses to become corporate sponsors for their team.

Because of their Diamond Team Award status, Mel's Support Squad will be kicking off this year's MS Walk in Valley Forge.

"I've had an overflowing of support like I've never experienced," Mel said. "And it's not just for me, but for the entire MS community."

"I'm so thankful for the community support. It's been overwhelming. It's nice to know what people will do to help others out of the goodness of their hearts."

To find out more about Mel's Support Squad, upcoming events or to register for the walk, please visit their website at www.melssupportsquad.com. There is also a link to make monetary donations.

To mail a check donation, please make the check payable to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and mail to: Mel's Support Squad, 1900 Detweiler Road, Pottstown, PA 19464.

URL: http://www.berksmontnews.com/articles/2011/03/16/community_connection/news/doc4d80a0a91f8d2321722477.prt

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