

Stronger Every Step: SJCC's Cancer Wellness Programs Fuel Relentless Pursuit of Life Beyond Cancer

"I don't know how much time I have left, but I want to enjoy it."

Judy Israel's story is one of strength, determination, and an unwavering commitment to living her life fully despite the immense challenges she has faced.

Judy, a long-time member of Sid Jacobson JCC's Nancy Marx Cancer Wellness Center, has been battling Stage 4 metastatic breast cancer. Her journey with cancer began in 2013, when she was first diagnosed with Stage 2 bilateral breast cancer.

Her initial diagnosis came in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which not only destroyed her home in Point Lookout on Long Island, but also disrupted her personal health routines. With her family and home in crisis, Judy put her health on the back burner, leading to a delayed mammogram and eventually the discovery of a lump.

Judy's fight against cancer was intense. She underwent 16 rounds of chemotherapy, followed by a double mastectomy, radiation, and multiple breast reconstruction surgeries. The treatments were physically and emotionally exhausting, especially the reconstructions, which were complicated by radiation-damaged skin that made the process even more painful and challenging. Yet, despite the relentless toll on her body, Judy approached each step with fierce determination.

"I was going to win that little war," she recalled.

Her resolve was not just about surviving for herself; it was deeply rooted in her love for her then 14-year-old daughter, Erica. "I wasn't going to leave her motherless," Judy affirmed, as she kept her daughter's life as normal as possible during those trying years.

In August 2014, after months of painful procedures and recovery, Judy triumphed—entering remission. It was the culmination of a fight she had never wavered in, and for the next seven years, she lived cancer-free.

However, in June 2021, the cancer returned in a more aggressive form—Stage 4 metastatic breast cancer that had spread to her liver and bones.

The diagnosis blindsided her, as she diligently attended all her doctor's appointments. "I never dreamed that this was happening again," Judy remarked, recalling how her tumor markers had skyrocketed. A startling recurrence that presented new challenges, Judy has since undergone multiple rounds of chemotherapy once again, each drug working for a time until it stopped.

Judy's relationship with Sid Jacobson JCC's Nancy Marx Cancer Wellness Center has been a cornerstone of her journey. She first connected with the center after her initial remission, finding emotional and physical support through the Center's director, **Randy Hight**.

The Center provided her with a community of individuals who could relate to her experience, offering programs, support groups, and exercise classes tailored to cancer patients and survivors. As Judy's cancer returned, her

involvement with the center deepened. Today, she serves as an ambassador to its Advisory Board, using her experience to support and inspire others.

As Judy continues to face an uphill battle, one of the events that holds deep significance for her is the Stronger Than Cancer 5K. This event, which she has participated in for eight years, brings together people from all walks of life to support those affected by cancer.

“All these people are coming out to help those battling cancer, and they don’t know these people— all the love and support that’s there. It’s wonderful,” Judy said. For her, the 5K symbolizes strength, courage, and hope—qualities that have defined her journey. Though her recent physical challenges have made it difficult for her to train for the walk, she remains determined. “I am practicing walking a mile at a time at home. I am determined to do it and get strong enough to walk it [the 5K].”

Sid Jacobson JCC’s Stronger Than Cancer 5K is more than just a race; it is a lifeline for SJJCC’s Nancy Marx Cancer Wellness Center. As the Center’s largest fundraiser, it ensures that personalized services, including counseling, exercise classes, and discussion groups, remain free for cancer patients and their caregivers.

The financial burden of cancer can be overwhelming, and the services provided by the center offer vital support for those who need it most. As Randy Hight noted, “Cancer can be financially toxic to patients. The 5K allows us to keep all our programs and services free.”

Judy’s story exemplifies the power of community, the importance of support, and the strength found in hope. Her determination to live her life to the fullest, despite the obstacles she faces, is an inspiration to all who know her. As she prepares for the 5K, she continues to embody the spirit of the event—proving that together, we are all stronger than cancer.

On Sunday, September 29, the community will come together once again for a day of unity, love, and support. Whether Judy is able to walk the race or not, her story and the stories of others like her will fuel the mission of our Nancy Marx Cancer Wellness Center, ensuring that no one faces cancer alone.