

## Dignity in life - and death: Painful loss inspires Cornwall-on-Hudson woman to help families in crisis

“He was the love of my life,” says Barbara Newman Mannix, of her late husband Jim. “We were together for 20 years.” When Jim was diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer in 2006, Barbara never expected to find her calling. But in tragedy, she was inspired to launch a service to help families in distress.

Photo by KENT O'CONNELL

By Deborah J. Botti  
For the Times Herald-Record  
Posted: October 21, 2009 - 2:00 AM

Barbara Newman Mannix frequently refers to the "birds of Cinderella" — those loving creatures who acted on behalf of the fairy tale's heroine, to make everything right for her.

In the Disney cartoon, the feathered friends were there to add the finishing details to Cinderella's gown, share the joy when the pumpkin turned into a carriage and intervene with the prince on Cinderella's behalf.

In Mannix's case, it was the dedicated support from family, friends and medical staff that allowed her husband's terminal cancer to be faced with dignity.

### **Coping with tragedy**

Barbara Newman Mannix offers these words of wisdom:

- The euphemism "time heals all wounds" exists because it's true. "The kids and I feel good now because we are good." That doesn't mean they're not sad sometimes or that the man who was so important to them is not still sorely missed. But time has allowed them to move forward.
- Get your ducks in a row - again, another expression that exists because it's real. When faced with a life-altering event, you need to discuss it and make plans. "We didn't bury our heads in the sand."
- Stay focused and calm.

- Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Deborah J. Botti

"You have to know there's somebody out there for you," she says. "All I did the first year was thank people."

Including her husband, Jim.

"He was totally committed to making a great day for us every day," she says — even during the "most-caught-off-guard moment" of their lives.

"Jim had a wild reaction to the dye used during the CAT scan," Mannix says. "But there was a lot of levity, even through this. He joked, 'I can't even get through the CAT scan to find out if I'm dying.'"

He did get through the CAT scan, though, and on March 15, 2006, stomach cancer was determined to be the cause of the steady erosion of his robust appetite and now almost-intolerable acid reflux.

"His ultimate concern was the children. He set the tone," Mannix says.

One of the first questions asked of the doctor was whether he'd be able to attend the baseball game on June 6 — the twins' ninth birthdays — between the Yankees and the Red Sox.

"The tickets were a Christmas present," she says. "They believed in Santa then.

"We left Columbia Presbyterian, assured we would be at the baseball game, which we were."

As soon as they crossed the George Washington Bridge, heading home to Cornwall-on-Hudson, they were both on their respective cell phones. Jim, a lawyer, was calling his secretary to get his calendar covered.

"I was calling everyone I knew to facilitate getting Jim into (Memorial) Sloan-Kettering (Cancer Center)," Mannix says. "We couldn't look at each other yet."

They got home about 40 minutes later, and with the moment of immediacy over, it was now business as usual — even though "business" had changed dramatically.

"We felt we had to relate the whole thing to normalcy. We couldn't abandon our daily routine," she says. "We were still functioning as a family."

Seeds of inspiration

At Memorial Sloan-Kettering, the Mannixes were told that aggressive chemotherapy might contain and maintain the cancer, but that there was no possibility of a cure. Through the blur of doctors and conferences, waiting rooms and treatments, inspirational seeds were being planted that would not take root until months later.

"And we even made chemo a date. We'd put the order in (for chemo) and then go to lunch first," she says. "We were living."

In stark contrast, Mannix noticed that many patients and their families they encountered weren't. She had a conference with her brother, a physician, every day for six months.

She never had to worry about the time spent at the hospital; the twins were always cared for.

And she was struck by how inspirational and optimistic the staff at Sloan-Kettering was. "They brought themselves down to lay emotions," Mannix says. "They were taking care of patients and, by proxy, were taking care of everyone.

"Of course, at that time, I wasn't cognizant of how I was being handled."

Every night, before falling asleep, Jim and Barbara would regroup. "I'd apologize "» and he'd say 'It's OK that it's me.' "» You can't let somebody like that down," she says. "He was the love of my life. We were together for 20 years."

### **Recognizing blessings in tragedy**

On Sept. 15, six months from the date of diagnosis, Jim passed away.

And during the next "most-caught-off-guard moment" of her life, she still saw the blessings. Their home would be the same. The twins' school would be the same. And the beyond-belief friends and families would always be close.

"I was able to stay home for a year and a half, but I couldn't just stay home financially forever," the self-described "go-to" person with honed research skills says.

She went over and over and over things in her mind — her journey with Jim in the forefront. And from tragedy, A Dignified Life LLC was born.

What became apparent as she mulled over the past months was that so many people lacked all the "birds of Cinderella" that she had.

### **Where to turn?**

With the help of a business counselor and armed with the results of much research, she identified a niche in the baby boomer market. "The population in need is the 'sandwich generation,'" she says. "They still have active lives — careers and families — while

trying to deal with mom's stroke or dad's signs of dementia. "» Many people don't know where to turn or start; it's a stressful and time-consuming proposition."

Kris Seiz of Cornwall-on-Hudson was Mannix's first client back in the late winter of 2007. "I knew of Barbara from living in the same village," says Seiz. "She overheard someone talking to me in a restaurant about my mom with Alzheimer's."

At that time, Seiz's mother was living alone in Vero Beach, Fla. "She was still driving, and I was very worried," she says. "I was flying down there every month."

Mannix approached Seiz and asked if she could be of assistance, explaining the concept of her new business — a resource/research tool to assist during life's "most-caught-off-guard moments."

"She helps with the transitioning into different stages of life," says Seiz, who is a co-owner of Storm King Adventure Tours. "We didn't need help with estate planning; that was all taken care of. But I had no idea how to find help to come into the house — especially since Mom didn't want care."

Mannix researched health-care agencies, did background checks and set the interview appointments to ensure Seiz's next trip south would be fruitful.

No price tag on peace of mind

"I had five interviews one day, six the next," says Seiz, who hired the five candidates who interacted best with her mother.

"She saved me so much stress," says Seiz. "You can't put a price on peace of mind."

Through the agency that Mannix found, Home Instead, Seiz has since been able to secure round-the-clock care — calling on Mannix once again as her mother's condition deteriorated.

"I promised my mother I wouldn't move her into a nursing home," says Seiz. "She wants — and deserves — a dignified life in her beach house."

By the numbers

- The 50- to 69-year-old age group is projected to grow 20 percent by 2015 and will make up about 40 percent of the populations of Orange, Ulster, Sullivan and Dutchess counties.
- By 2050, it is projected that 16 million Americans will have Alzheimer's disease.
- In 2005, there were 10,701,000 Americans living with or recently diagnosed with cancer.

- Almost one out of every two men has a risk of developing cancer in their lifetimes and a one-in-four risk of dying from the disease.
- Women's risk is about one in three, with about one out of four dying from cancer.

Compiled by Deborah J. Botti, from American FactFinder, American Cancer Society, Alzheimer's Association and other Web sites  
Securing A Dignified Life

When Barbara Newman Mannix is contacted:

- The initial consultation will discern concerns and establish short- and long-term goals.
- The family will be asked to organize a family meeting at their home, which Mannix will attend. Out-of-state members will be on a speaker phone. Difficult issues, from full financial disclosure to facing denial, are addressed.
- In the next phase, Mannix does her research, based on the goals established. Thirteen services are offered, ranging from elder care to assistance with benefits to relocation services.
- A report is presented to the "family quarterback."

If a nursing home is needed, for example, Mannix will not recommend any place that she wouldn't see her father in. If in-home care is needed, she'll attempt to match people's personalities.

- Each client also receives a 13-page glossary of terms that family will hear as they navigate the system.

For more information, visit [www.adignifiedlife.com](http://www.adignifiedlife.com)

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