



NY Times profiles major supporters of SWCRF

THREE SISTERS, ONE BATTLE TO BREAK A CHAIN OF CANCER

Robin Finn
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SURVIVORS From left, Kathleen Sarna, Jane Stanczuk and Lucille Montrony are sisters who raise money for cancer sufferers.

BEFORE matter-of-factly signing off with the words she says far too often — “I’ve got another wake to go to” — Kathleen Sarna, the chief keeper of the flame for the Three Strohm Sisters Family

Foundation, settled into a complicated excavation of her family tree. That cancer, not nourishing sap, courses willy-nilly through the branches of that tree is the disturbing raison d’être behind the foundation, which this month received the Town of Hempstead’s Pathfinder Award in the humanitarian category.

Family adversity, and lots of it, pushed the Strohms into philanthropy in 1999. The sisters — Ms. Sarna, Lucille Montrony and Jane Stanczuk — took inspiration from Representative Carolyn McCarthy, the Long Islander who entered politics and lobbied incessantly for gun control after her husband was shot to death and her son injured by a deranged passenger on a Long Island Rail Road commuter train.

It was at a re-election event for Representative McCarthy in 2000 that Ms. Sarna ran into the comedian Rosie O’Donnell, a Commack native with her own unhappy link to cancer. “She told me her mother died of breast cancer,” Ms. Sarna recalled. “She had a theory it was something on Long Island, maybe the electrical wires.”

The Strohm sisters had their own theory: the twice-a-year chest X-rays they endured after their mother was hospitalized with tuberculosis in 1947; she died four years later.

The sisters briefly considered enlisting Ms. O’Donnell as a celebrity centerpiece for their foundation — “Kind of like Carol Baldwin’s foundation is helped by the fact that her sons are famous actors,” Ms. Sarna said — but there was a hitch. Ms. O’Donnell wasn’t family. Or readily available. So the siblings determined to go it alone at the

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Samuel Waxman Cancer Research Foundation

1249 Fifth Avenue
Suite #907
New York, NY 10029

tel: 212-348-0136

email:
swcrf@waxmancancer.org

grass-roots level. Ms. Sarna's background in advertising (American Advertising in Elmont) came in handy, as did the client connections of her older sister, Jane, a banker at CitiBank in Franklin Square.

"We were never that close as a family," said Ms. Sarna, orphaned at age 15 (her father, a New York City Department of Sanitation worker, drowned in an accident in 1955) and brought up by an aunt in Elmont, "but cancer became the tie that binds and brought us together to try and make a difference in the lives of women who are going through what we went through. You could say that as a family we are a rarity: Eight of 10 female first cousins have had cancer." Four died. "It seems to surround us."

Ms. Sarna, 67, is the middle sister and was the second to receive a diagnosis of breast cancer, with all three doses of daunting medical news delivered within a two-year span. What the three Strohm sisters have since done is to mobilize as a family unit and raise more than \$250,000 toward cancer research and support programs. The [Samuel Waxman Cancer Research Foundation](#) at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City has been their primary beneficiary.

Ms. Montrony, a Nassau County Police crossing guard who lives in Elmont and, at 63, the baby of the Strohm sisters, was the first of them to receive a diagnosis of breast cancer, after a mammogram. She underwent a mastectomy in June 1991 at age 46. But her two older sisters failed to take the hint.

"I was stupid not to go and automatically get a mammogram," Ms. Sarna said, "because as it turns out, I probably had cancer even before Lucille did."

Dr. Waxman became Ms. Sarna's oncologist — she went to him for a second opinion — after she underwent surgery mandated by a December 1993 diagnosis of Stage 2 breast cancer that had spread to the adjacent lymph nodes. Treatment included a mastectomy and 16 months of chemotherapy. "I'm the only one of the three of us who had to have chemo," she said. "I was a basket case. I thought, 'I'm going to be the one who doesn't make it.' Dr. Waxman convinced me I'd come through it."

Their older sister, Ms. Stanczuk, 71, of Franklin Square, was confirmed with breast cancer just six weeks after Ms. Sarna's surgery. She, too, underwent a mastectomy, and she, too, became a patient of Dr. Waxman. But the pattern persists: Ms. Stanczuk's daughter, Helen Lund, is now a patient of Dr. Waxman after a diagnosis of breast cancer at 46, the same age her Aunt Lucille was when the chain of events that precipitated the Three Strohm Sisters Family Foundation was set in motion.

Whether the cycle will end in her lifetime is anyone's guess, Ms. Sarna said. Until it does, the foundation will perpetuate itself with its series of fund-raisers.

Next up, on April 16, is the annual Chinese Auction; this year it is being held at Pompei Caterers in Franklin Square. On June 1, at the Brokerage in Bellmore, the foundation will stage its popular comedy benefit; Lucille Montrony's son, Chris Monty, a professional comedian, is the host. Its first golf event is scheduled for June 26 in Lido Beach. "Knock on wood, it'll be a success, too," Ms. Sarna worried.

"Running the foundation has almost become a full-time job," she added, "but at

least I know it's for a good cause." And not, knock on wood, a lost cause.

Collaborating for a Cure through the SWCRF Institute Without Walls