



photography by Monica Sigmon

René Bowditch, left; Mary Beth Gibson, right.



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The Women of Beyond Boobs!

Local Support Group for Young Women Uses Humor to Heal Creates Calendar to Encourage Breast Health

by Page Bishop-Freer

When René Bowditch and Mary Beth Gibson met at last year's "Health, Hope and Healing," an annual retreat for breast cancer survivors sponsored by Sentara Women's Imaging Pavilion, Gibson was still receiving chemotherapy treatments for the cancer that had invaded her right breast earlier that year. Bowditch, a four-year breast cancer survivor, was teaching courses at the College of William and Mary's Marshall Wythe School of Law and moonlighting as the "Good Health Fairy" at local hospitals and cancer care centers. "Have you ever met someone who talks about herself in the third person?" asks Gibson, looking at her friend with great pride. (The spunky, blonde law professor's "alter ego" frequently visits cancer patients to share her inspirational story of how maintaining a positive attitude helped her cope with breast cancer.)

During the retreat, Gibson and Bowditch began discussing the unique challenges that face young women with breast cancer, particularly women diagnosed before menopause — a propensity for tumors that are more aggressive as well as limited access to resources, fertility issues, early menopause and dating after having breast reconstruction. "Young women with breast cancer may feel isolated," says Gibson, who had both breasts removed in a double mastectomy procedure one month after the 2006 retreat. "Many [women] are also told [by their doctors] not to worry because they are [so] young." Gibson, for example, knew her risk for developing breast cancer at a young age was high because both her mother and maternal grandmother had been diagnosed at age 40. Gibson brought these concerns to her doctor beginning in her 30s and repeatedly asked for guidance on how she could be proactive about addressing her high risk. Her doctor assured her an annual mammogram was adequate. Gibson was diagnosed with stage II breast cancer at age 41. She now realizes that far more should have been done for her to ensure the earliest possible detection.

One month after the 2006 retreat, Gibson, Bowditch and a small group of women gathered at Bowditch's home for a cup of tea and intimate conversation. When the word spread about a resource for young breast cancer

A Message from Beyond Boobs!:

- Know your risk factors for breast cancer.*
- Never dismiss your concerns.*
- Don't be immobilized by fear.*
- Take responsibility for your breast health.*
- Encourage other women to do the same.*

survivors, women as young as their 20s and 30s began attending meetings. Searching for a name that reflected the importance of humor in the healing process, the newly formed group named itself "Beyond Boobs!" These women now congregate monthly to share their stories, advice, and even prostheses. "Anyone facing a life-altering situation gets a new perspective on life," says Gibson. For Bowditch and Gibson, letting go of the hurt and anger, and allowing room for laughter and love, was an integral part of coming to grips with breast cancer. Together, they've helped other women do the same.

Beyond Boobs! embraces the philosophy of living life to the fullest. Its members, who range from 28 to 59 years of age, want to reinforce the message that femininity and female self-worth are not defined by a woman's breasts. The group felt a need to educate other young women about breast cancer, and the idea of developing a calendar emerged. More than just a calendar, "A Calendar to Live By" is an awareness tool that goes on sale later this month locally and at www.beyondboobs.com. The photography and design are the work of local photographic artist Monica Sigmon. Each month features a young breast cancer survivor giving an inspirational message such as "Dream" or "Inspire" or "Laugh." There are 11 additional pages of resource information, such as "How to Do A Self-Breast Exam" and stickers to remind women to do one each month. Ten percent of the calendar's sales will go to support the local efforts of the Susan G. Komen Foundation for Breast Cancer Research. Other revenue generated will be used to provide low-income women with a calendar free of charge.

In the preface of the calendar, Beyond Boobs! founders Bowditch and Gibson urge women to become advocates for their own breast health by practicing monthly self-breast exams and following their intuition, something both women admit they wish they'd done more of. The founders also share some of the things they wish they'd known before being diagnosed with this life-altering disease: first and foremost, that young women *can* and *do* get breast cancer, and that early detection is the key to surviving the disease and maintaining quality of life. Bowditch and Gibson hope to take both the calendar and Beyond Boobs!, Inc., to the national level and establish similar groups in other states. They plan to visit local high schools and college campuses in the near future to spread the word about early detection. ■

October Events

The 6th annual "Health, Hope and Healing: A Breast Cancer Survivors' Retreat" will be held on Oct. 20 at Wareham's Pond Clubhouse in Williamsburg. If you are interested in attending this all-day event, call 984-7106. According to Bowditch, "It's a tremendous gift to women, an uplifting day."

A launch party for the 2008 "A Calendar to Live By" will be held on Oct. 25, from 7 to 9 p.m., in the Sentara Williamsburg Regional Medical Center lobby. Tickets are \$50/person and include a calendar. Visit www.beyondboobs.org for ticket information, or call Mary Beth Gibson at 741-1027 or René Bowditch at 561-4749.