

A man on a mission



MELISSA EVANKO / Pocono Record

Bill Thiel reflects at the Bushkill cemetery grave site of his wife, Maureen, on the anniversary of her death. Bill is on a mission to educate women about breast cancer in memory of his wife, who died seven years ago on Monday.

Bill Thiel carries on crusade in wife's name

By **SUSAN KOOMAR**
News and Business Editor

Bill Thiel visited his wife's grave Monday to tell her that he kept his promise.

He left the glare of TV camera lights in a hotel near Pittston and drove to a Bushkill cemetery in the shimmer of late-afternoon sun.

He rushed to get there by 4:23 p.m. — the time his wife died seven years ago.

Thiel got out of his minivan and

walked to a plot where junipers have been pruned into a bushy green heart. A white dogwood blooms in the background.

He put his hand on the headstone. "I promised Maureen I'd tell her story and save another woman's life," said Thiel. "I did good at the press conference. I didn't cry. Maureen would be proud of me."

Thiel's crusade to prevent breast can-

cer misdiagnosis began with his wife's death in 1998. She was 43.

Her family received one of the largest malpractice awards in Monroe County history following a lawsuit against three doctors who, on three separate occasions, told her not to worry about the lumps in her breast. Just benign fibroid cysts, they said. No need for a biopsy.

See **MISSION**, Page A2

Pocono Record

MISSION

From Page A1

She was given less than two years to live by the time somebody got the diagnosis right.

Maureen screamed when she heard the news. She endured a lumpectomy, then one mastectomy, then another. The cancer spread to her brain and her lungs.

"She died a horrible death," said Thiel. "Society accepts misdiagnosis. It's not acceptable."

Monday marked the launch of Maureen's Mission, a non-profit organization founded to promote early diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

Thiel is raising money for a brochure that he wants to make available in every doctor's office across the country. The brochure will list appropriate care including an immediate mammogram or ultrasound and discussion of a biopsy for every woman who has a breast lump.

He also wants to raise money for biopsies for women who can't afford them.

Thiel plans to meet on May 24 with Pennsylvania's secretary of health to promote

standard care that, he said, will prevent misdiagnosis.

Thiel has radio and television interviews scheduled across the state. He hired an author to write a book about his wife's ordeal.

Ultimately, Thiel wants to tell Maureen's story on national television, preferably "The Oprah Winfrey Show," and persuade Congress to adopt a national standard of care for women with breast lumps.

"What I have to say can save a lot of lives," said Thiel, a former landscaper whose calloused hands contrast with his tidy brown suit.

Thiel, 44, has a part-time business selling gourmet coffee. He spends most of his time on Maureen's Mission including researching cases similar to his wife's via the Internet.

"I have a stack this high of the same stories and another stack of lawsuits from almost every state," he said. "In every one, the doctors failed to follow a standard of care."

A local jury awarded Maureen's family \$5.4 million after finding Dr. Pamela Villanyi of Shawnee Medical and Dr. Lawrence Klein of Pocono Surgical Associates negligent.

Dr. Frank Fusco of Shawnee Medical was found not negligent.

The doctors no longer practice medicine here, said Thiel.

The amount of money actually received by the Thiels was less than the jury award, but Bill Thiel is restricted from discussing the final settlement.

After his wife died, Thiel and the couple's two sons moved from Bushkill to West Pittston seeking escape from the house where Maureen ran a hair salon, baked scrumptious deserts for church events and packed picnics for family camping trips to Promise Land State Park.

Maureen was so beloved that police were needed to direct the line of traffic at her funeral.

"Her death destroyed the community. All you saw was pain in people's eyes," said Thiel.

He called Maureen an angel even before she died.

"She was the type of person who just gave and gave and gave," said Thiel.

He wants Maureen's friends and former neighbors in Bushkill to know something good is coming from her death.

"I want them to put away the pain now and be proud of what Maureen did for other women," said Thiel.

On the Web: maurensmission.org