

Maureen's Mission

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Seven years after his wife died of cancer, man promoting universal standard of care

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Three doctors over two and half years told Maureen Thiel not to worry about the lumps in her breast, because they weren't cancerous.

Then, she found a lump under her arm and visited a fourth doctor, who ordered a biopsy and found cancer in all 47 lymph nodes that he removed.

Her husband, Bill, remembers her screams as she learned the diagnosis while still lying on a gurney following the surgery.

The shrill still haunts him, he said.

Maureen underwent multiple surgeries, chemotherapy and stem-cell replacement therapy, but the cancer spread to her brain, bones and lungs, Bill Thiel said.

She died 14 months later, but not without leaving her husband with a mission.

"She knew she didn't have much time left," Thiel said. "She made me promise to tell her story because she didn't want her life - and death - to be in vain."

"She made me promise to tell her story so that other women wouldn't have to die like she did," he said.

On Monday - seven years to the day Maureen died - the West Pittston man fulfilled the prom-

ise, launching Maureen's Mission, a nonprofit organization dedicated to early diagnoses and treatment of breast cancer.

"Cancer killed my wife, but a universal standard of care could have saved her life," he told reporters at a press conference in Pittston. "My wife's case was not a fluke. It was not simply a case of one incompetent doctor dropping the ball."

"This was a case of three different doctors dropping the ball

universal standard of care.

He drafted a standard of care and began work with the Linda Creed Breast Cancer Foundation in Philadelphia to develop a brochure to be placed in doctors' offices nationwide to educate women on standard of care, he said.

"With today's technology, cancer is not a death sentence," Thiel said. "Early diagnosis is the key, not early detection."

Maureen's cancer was detected

in late November 1994 when she found the first small lump in her breast, he said. The cancer wasn't diagnosed until after she found the lump under her arm two years later.

Under Thiel's universal standard of care proposal, women would be given a pamphlet outlining the standard - perform a mammogram or ultrasound immediately, discuss a biopsy and allow no more than one month to pass before re-evaluation,

when a biopsy should be performed if the lump remains, he said.

A Monroe County jury awarded the Thiels \$5.4 million in damages last summer. Maureen's malpractice case didn't go to trial until six years after her death.

The money belongs to the Thiels' sons, Erik and Ryan, their father said.



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by failing to follow the standard of care," he said. "If doctors had performed a biopsy soon after Maureen first found her breast lump, there's a good chance she would still be alive today."

As executive director of Maureen's Mission, Thiel plans to meet with U.S. Rep. Paul E. Kanjorski in Washington, D.C., and Dr. Calvin B. Johnson, the state secretary of health, this week to push for the adoption of a uni-

Mission

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But money wasn't the issue for his wife, Thiel said. She wanted these doctors to be held accountable, and to make women aware of what happened to her, he said.

Maureen also wanted her husband to share her story, and Thiel hasn't stopped talking about his wife's experience since her death, he said. Sometimes, it's one-on-one conversations. Other times, groups ask him to speak.

"My goal is to save one woman's life," Thiel said.

He also has a book about Maureen's experience in the works, and hopes to establish a fund through Maureen's Mission to pay for biopsies for women who can't afford them or whose insurance plan won't pay for them.

Thiel knows he has an uphill battle ahead of him, especially with getting state and federal laws passed, but he refuses to give up.

Too many women's lives are at stake, he said. Fifteen out of every 100 women who find a lump in their breast have cancer and leave their doctors' offices without ever knowing, just like Maureen did, Thiel said.

Since going public with Maureen's Mission, Thiel has received e-mails and phone calls from women throughout northeastern Pennsylvania thanking and supporting him, he said. For others, the story hit close to home, he said.

"Maureen's story could be my story so I feel the need to have (the breast lump) evaluated again," one woman wrote. "Your article prompted me to go one step further and seek yet another opinion."

Thiel hopes the lump in the woman's breast isn't cancer, but without a biopsy there is no clear diagnosis, he said.

"Early detection of breast lumps ... it's simply not enough," he said. "It wasn't enough in Maureen's case and it isn't enough in many other cases. We need early diagnosis and the only way to achieve that is through a universal standard of care."

Maureen's Mission will hold its first Swing for Life golf outing at the Four Seasons Golf Course in Exeter. Thiel hopes it

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