

COMMUNITY PROFILES JANICE McQUEEN-WARD

Turning tragedy into advocacy

BY ALEXANDRA BISSONNETTE

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DOWNTOWN When Santa Monica resident Janice McQueen-Ward lost her mother, Margaret McQueen, to stage-four lung cancer 12 years ago, she did not know that her grief would manifest itself as passion for a cause.

“Lung cancer is a silent killer,” McQueen-Ward said. “It is the number one cancer killer in the world.” McQueen-Ward has since become a vocal advocate for the National Lung Cancer Partnership (NLCP). She is also a full-time actress and aerobics instructor, and she helps those with grief similar to her own by acting as a counselor.

McQueen-Ward’s mother was not the only one in her family to pass away from lung cancer. Her uncle, legendary actor Steve McQueen, died at the age of 50 after being diagnosed with mesothelioma.

The loss of her mother was particularly difficult for McQueen-Ward not only because she had lost a beloved member of her family, but also because she felt that it could have been prevented.

“My mother went to the doctor every six months for a full check up, and they always told her that her lungs were completely clear,” McQueen-Ward said. “She was extra cautious, but we never saw the signs. Lung cancer is one of those things where you notice the signs too late.”

That fact is reinforced by the World Health Organization’s statistics which state that 1.2 million new cases of lung cancer are diagnosed annually, and 1.1 million people die from the disease each year.

Margaret McQueen’s case is not uncommon. She quit smoking 10 years prior to her diagnosis and doctors told her that lungs heal and clear themselves in just five years. But McQueen-Ward points out that “if you have already developed cancer cells, they will continue to grow.”

After a series of misdiagnoses ranging from sinus infections to stress, the cancer had spread to McQueen-Ward’s mother’s brain. When the doctors finally diagnosed her with stage four lung cancer, it was too late. They gave her six months to live and put her on radiation.

She passed six-and-a-half weeks later. “She shriveled up and died right in front of me,” McQueen-Ward said. “It’s a horrible disease and I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.”

As a result of her mother’s experience, McQueen-Ward learned a lot about the complexities surrounding lung cancer diagnoses. Even though her mother had her lungs checked every six months as a preventative measure, the doctors did not find it in time.

“It is very frustrating for me now that I know the signs,” she said.

McQueen-Ward also discovered that there is a stigma attached to the deadly disease. People naturally assume that someone diagnosed with lung cancer has been a heavy smoker.

“It is really frustrating for fighters for lung cancer awareness,” she said. “You can get lung cancer any time after being exposed to carcinogens. It is not just a smoker’s disease.”

At a walk-a-thon last year, McQueen-Ward met a woman whose 18-year-old daughter had been diagnosed with stage four lung cancer.

“You can’t point a finger and say that is because of years of smoking,” she said. “We try not to combine the two conversations because it is irrelevant. Whether or not you smoke doesn’t mean you deserve [lung cancer].”

While grieving for her mother, McQueen-Ward felt alone and desperate for support.

“There was nowhere for me to go, no support groups,” she said. “I felt completely helpless and hopeless. When I found the National Lung Cancer Partnership, I felt like I found someone who knew what I was going through.”

The NLCP is a non-profit organization formed in 2001 with the aim of reducing deaths due to lung cancer through research, awareness and advocacy.

“It was a saving grace for me,” McQueen-Ward said.

Since becoming involved in the organization, McQueen-Ward has become a vocal advocate for lung cancer awareness. She not only volunteers with the NLCP, but she is also working alongside U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-NE) and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) on the Lung Cancer Mortality Reduction Act of 2008, which makes lung cancer a national public health priority and calls for a mortality reduction program coordinated by the Secretary of Health and Human Service.

“We have seen great advancements in prostate and breast cancer survival rates and we must commit ourselves to making the same progress with lung cancer,” Hagel said.

“We must bring people together and have the resources to fight this insidious disease.”

McQueen-Ward will also be running this year’s Free to Breathe 5K walk/run on Sunday, Aug. 3 in Playa del Rey to raise awareness and funds for lung cancer research and education. This is the second event of its kind in Los Angeles — last year’s effort brought in close to \$40,000 and had 1,000 participants. The walk/run will kick off at Dockweiler State Park.

“We really need local support from people of Santa Monica, the Westside, and local businesses,” McQueen-Ward said. “We have a long way to go, and any help is fantastic.”

McQueen-Ward’s passion for making lung cancer a national health priority has become a part of her everyday life. Her goal is to help find a “mammogram for lung cancer” — in other words, a yearly test that people can rely on to detect lung cancer in its earliest stages.

McQueen-Ward, who now lives in Santa Monica with her 15-year-old son and her husband, has always had a busy and philanthropy- focused schedule. As Mrs. United States in 1999, she traveled the nation as an advocate for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association.

“You just have to keep on going with life,” she said. “I never stop going.”