

# Breast cancer young survivor wants to help others cope

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THE DELAWARE BREAST CANCER COALITION'S YOUNG SURVIVORS IN ACTION OUTINGS OFTEN INCLUDE WOMEN OF MANY AGES, ALL DIAGNOSED BEFORE THE AGE OF 40,

Stephanie Cumella was only 32, with two young children, when she was diagnosed with a deadly form of breast cancer.

The disease threw her world into chaos as she tried to cope with treatment, work, family life and more.

It would also lead her into a career change, working with young breast cancer survivors who, like her, were diagnosed in their 20s or 30s.

"I can't really speak for everybody but I know for me your kids are in sporting events or they're in some sort of class play, or they have things that they have to go to," she said. "It's very hard to really take care of yourself and make that time because your life really kind of revolves around being a mom, being a wife and being a homemaker."

Her first interaction with the [Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition](#) was at the time of her diagnosis, when the nurse navigator put her in touch with the Coalition's Lois Wilkinson.



STEPHANIE CUMELLA

Wilkinson talked about her story, which started with a diagnosis at age 47. She left Cumella with the feeling that the Coalition offered a place of community. Even so, it was a few years before she attended a DBCC event.

That came at a Survivor's Night at the [Blue Rocks](#).

Cumella chose that event because it was a family event and because other events had been during the work day or at times that were hard for her to fit into the demands of her paralegal work, treatment regimen and family schedule.

Seven years later, she's a Coalition Survivorship Specialist and program manager of its [Young Survivors in Action](#) program.

Her work with DBCC started when the company she worked for encouraged their workers to get back to a local charity. She chose to volunteer at the Monster Mile walk in Dover, a breast cancer fundraiser. That led to more volunteering and, finally, an invitation to join the team as a survivorship specialist.

Cumella says her goal is to help young women and men find lasting friendship and bonds that helps them cope with the traumatic experience of cancer.

“You know, a lot of times you feel like you’re alone in it, even if you’ve had a partner that walked right next to you,” she said. “It’s definitely different having been in those shoes.”

She found simply talking with women who had the same experience to be emotional, supportive and ultimately healing.

“It’s just taking that initial step and trusting that we’re very welcoming and making sure that everybody has a good time,” she said.

DBCC'S YOUNG SURVIVOR IN ACTION PROGRAMS ARE DESIGNED TO FOSTER FRIENDSHIPS AND RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED THE DISEASE.

## **Diagnoses rising**

Women being diagnosed with breast cancer at a younger age is a rising national trend. It's still considered unusual, affecting only about 5% of women under age 40, but the rate of those diagnoses have been rising at 2% a year, according to [Breastcancer.org](https://www.breastcancer.org).

The median age at diagnosis is 62, meaning that half of the women are diagnosed before age 62 and half are diagnosed afterward, the website said.

Many of the young women are diagnosed when they are pregnant or around the birth of a child, partly because pregnancy hormones encourage the growth of some cancers.

Cumella said the youngest woman she's known who was diagnosed with breast cancer was 28.

About 300 people have reached out or participated in Young Survivors programs in the last 18 months, Cumella said.

While Young Survivors focuses on those under the age of 40, many of the regular participants are people who were diagnosed young and have lived to be in their 40s, 50s and 60s.

"You are still a young survivor, you just happen to be over the age of 40," Cumella said.

Their participation also helps younger women see that there can be a long, fruitful life after treatment, Cumella said.

STEHANIE CUMELLA AND HER CHILDREN AT ONE YOUNG SURVIVORS IN ACTION FAMILY OUTING.

She discovered her own cancer after finding a lump in her right breast when she was trying to figure out why it was hurting.

The doctor she went to see wasn't particularly worried about the lump, mostly because of her age. He didn't suggest a mammogram but when Cumella asked for one, he readily agreed.

That led to a diagnosis of triple negative cancer, one of the hardest to cure. Cumella later found out she had the BRAC1 gene mutation, a marker that put her at high risk for breast and ovarian cancer.

Cumella chose to have a bilateral mastectomy, removing both breasts, followed by eight rounds of chemotherapy. Two years later she had surgery to remove her ovaries and ovarian tubes. Finally, she had breast reconstruction called a DIEP flap, using her own body tissue.

She's been cancer-free for seven years.

Cumella and her husband, Anthony, have been married for 15 years and have a son who's about to turn 11 and a daughter who is 9.

She says she's made some wonderful friends through the Young Survivors program and recently had a full-circle moment.

"A survivor asked me to be there for them during their last treatment, be there for them as they rang the bell," she said. "It was such a magical moment to be there and months afterward, the survivor told me that 'you continue to provide a listening ear and empathy and you always go above and beyond to make me feel special and accepted.'

"Hearing this was so rewarding and brought me to tears. It is in those moments, spoken or unspoken, that I truly feel as though I am making a difference."

YOUNG SURVIVOR IN ACTION OUTINGS COVER A RANGE OF TOPICS AND INTERESTS.

Cumella plans events online and in person. They range from exercise-related program to arts and crafts to meditation. One of her upcoming in-person events is an Aug. 3 full body sound bath.

Each month, the program offers FUNctional Fitness, an exercise class that requires no equipment and is suitable for all fitness levels; Yogalates, a combination of yoga and pilates; and Healing Meditation.



Many program events are exclusively for breast cancer survivors, partly to create opportunities to ask questions about things like fertility, sex, having children and telling children.

**IN THE NEWS:** [Kent County will have a Catholic high school starting in 2025](#)

There are also several special events open to survivors and their families such as the upcoming Survivor's Night at the Blue Rocks on Aug. 29.

Cumella also oversees the Coalition's healthy cooking program, [Yes to Health](#), which is open to anyone who is interested.

She said she wants people to know that she's there for anybody diagnosed with breast cancer, particularly young women and men, and wants them to feel comfortable about reaching out.

The best way to contact her is through her email, [scumella@debreastcancer.org](mailto:scumella@debreastcancer.org), which pops up on her phone, too.

You can follow the group's activities on [Facebook](#) and on [Instagram](#).

## Upcoming Young Survivor events

**June 27, 6 p.m.:** Clay Sea Creatures and Pinch Pots, Middletown

**July 3, 9:30 a.m.:** Yogalates, DBCC's Young Survivors in Action Facebook page

**July 12, 11:30 a.m.:** FUNctional Fitness, DBCC's Young Survivors in Action Facebook page

**July 17, 9:30 a.m.:** Healing Meditation, DBCC's Young Survivor in Action Facebook page

**Aug. 3, 1 p.m.:** 1.5 hour full body sound bath, Newark Natural Foods Community Room

**Aug. 29, 6:35 p.m.:** Survivors Night at the Blue Rocks, Wilmington