



*Doug Schneider/Staff Reporter*

Cortland firefighters are sporting pink in October to raise awareness of breast cancer. Their T-shirts, hoodies and other apparel feature an image of a hose twisted as a pink ribbon and the message: "No one fights alone."

# They don't just survive, the raise money to help others thrive

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For Kathleen Mezzaluna, the past years have been all about honoring the memory of her daughter, Laurie, who died almost 15 years ago.

For Wayne and Kathleen Friedman, the memories of Kathy's successful cancer battle are still vivid – though she's been free of the disease for nearly a decade.

For Sheila Ossit – also a breast cancer survivor – hearing her diagnosis prompted a surprise that approached shock. She and her husband were raising children, including a daughter.

Breast cancer isn't cheap. If insurance pays for the bulk of the

treatment – if one is well-insured – other costs remain. Travel for treatment, and sometimes housing. Incidentals, wigs, prosthetics. Medication co-pays. It adds up – \$200 a month for the typical breast cancer patient, reports the National Institutes of Health.

Fundraisers step up, sometimes to help with the cost, sometimes to simply raise awareness. Pink police badges, ribbon-adorned clothing, motorcycle rides by groups like the Chrome City Divas. They all chip in.

Laurie Mezzaluna, with degrees from Boston University in communications and Chinese history, died at age 41 in 2009, five years after founding the Saint Agatha Foundation. Her mother has continued her daughter's work to fund the expenses of cancer patients in Central New York. The name honors the patron saint of breast diseases.

The foundation serves residents of Cortland County and seven other counties and funds expenses for cancer patients.

"Laurie started a fund after she got sick," at the age of 27, her mother said. "I promised her I would help it (grow). It has grown exponentially."

Its annual fund-raising gala is Oct. 24 at Syracuse's OnCenter.

More than 15,000 women and 150 men are diagnosed with breast cancer each year, the foundation reports; about 2,600 die from the disease.

The foundation has helped 12,000 women "just to relax and heal," Mezzaluna said. They needn't worry about having the gas to drive to appointments, or the money to pay utility bills. The foundation has paid for patients' legal help. It's even paid for YWCA memberships so patients have a place to swim or exercise.

"Everyone thinks there's a catch," Mezzaluna said. There isn't.

## 'NO ONE FIGHTS ALONE'

Wayne and Kimberly Friedman's message is on almost every T-shirt and hoodie Cortland firefighters are wearing this month: No one fights alone.

It's a reminder that Wayne Friedman, now Cortland's fire chief, has a role in his wife's health, just as any loved one does. The reminder is all over the Cortland fire station, where firefighters wear T-shirts showing a pink hose wrapped in a ribbon and the message: "No one fights alone."

It's similar in concept to Cortland's police wearing pink badges to raise money for the Cancer

Resource Center of the Finger Lakes.

Almost a decade ago, Kimberly Friedman woke up from surgery, a radical mastectomy, at Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York. The brain fog made remembering that Wayne Friedman was just down the hall difficult. She remembers screaming, although her husband does not.

But he was there. Before her diagnosis, Kimberly Friedman's life was a ball of stress. And after? "From the moment I'd wake up in the morning, the fear would start to come in."

"I could choose to think about the fear, or push it out," she said. "That's taken a great effort; it's a full-time job of being well."

She has traded her stress-heavy existence for one where she regularly posts messages on TikTok with reminders to "relax" and especially, "breathe."

The Friedmans plan a trip next spring to Key West, Fla., to celebrate 20 years of marriage.

## RINGING THE BELL

"I was getting her ready for the prom," Ossit said of her life at the time she was diagnosed. "I had a job. There were a lot of other things. I didn't have time for cancer."

But she got a diagnosis: "You have breast cancer."

"I was 49," she recalls. "I had kids to raise, a job." She thought she was too young.

Today, she considers herself a survivor – a "thrivor." She was fortunate, she says, that she was diagnosed early, and that the radiation treatments left her cancer-free.

Still, treatment left her exhausted, especially from driving to Syracuse and back. It was hard on her husband, too; he'd lost his mother to cancer.

Ossit kept working during treatment, then later moved into a new role: raising money via the Cortland Memorial Foundation for groups that care for cancer patients.

She mentions several, including Syracuse-based Hope for Heather, which provides comfort items, to patients recovering from surgery, to gasoline cards to help patients fuel their cars for a check-up or treatment.

Now, she gets to work with social workers at the Renzi Center at Guthrie Cortland Medical Center, which opened in 2021, after Ossit's cancer treatment.

"This is in the community where we live," she said. "I love my job."

And she gets to ring the bell, a hospital celebration when a patient graduates from treatment.

## Foundations

- Saint Agatha Foundation – [SaintAgathaFoundation.org](https://www.saintagathafoundation.org).
- Cortland Memorial Foundation – [www.guthrie.org/cortland-memorial-foundation](https://www.guthrie.org/cortland-memorial-foundation)
- Hope for Heather – <https://www.hopeforheather.org/>