

# Marlborough woman uses her story to advocate for early cancer screenings

By Valerie Franchi  
Contributing Writer

**Marlborough** – Marlborough resident Debbie Whitmore is proof that life can change in an instant. In 2011, she was working as a nurse, raising four boys, and starting a new exercise program. Within a few months, she was diagnosed with incurable Stage IV colorectal cancer.

Whitmore, at 44, noticed she was finding herself more tired and out of breath than she thought normal. She also had an unusual craving for ice.

“My friends and I joked about it,” Whitmore recalled. “I was always eating popsicles.”

After hearing her symptoms, and discovering she was anemic, her doctor immediately scheduled a colonoscopy. The results showed a polyp and an ulcerated area within the colon. The first CT scan showed she had developed more than 12 liver lesions and a second scan showed over 20 liver tumors.

She and her husband Mark, who has a Ph.D. in cancer research, were shocked by the news.

“We both knew too much,” Whitmore said, adding that they understood more than most the dire prognosis.

Whitmore’s oncologist explained that she could be treated to prolong her life and decrease her symptoms. She began fighting the cancer with surgery and bi-weekly chemotherapy treatments.

“[My husband] and I talked about how I probably wouldn’t see our oldest son graduate from high school,” she said.

March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 150,000 Americans will be diagnosed with colorectal cancer in 2014, and more than 50,000 people will die from the disease. Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States among men and women—a staggering statistic that is not often discussed because of the private nature of the areas of the body affected by the disease.

Although the death rate from colorectal cancer has been dropping due to increased awareness, only 37 percent of cases are found in the earliest and most treatable stages.

“If it is caught early, it is one of the most treatable cancers,” Whitmore said. “Polyps can be completely removed.”

Despite the physical and emotional toll that her diagnosis and treatment has taken, Whitmore finds time to be an active volunteer for advocacy organizations and cancer groups.

She has spoken to employees at Boston Scientific, the man-



Debbie and Mark Whitmore with their four boys at a Red Sox game

ufacturer of tools used to diagnose and treat colorectal cancer, sharing her personal journey and stressing the importance of screenings to identify, remove and prevent polyps from turning into cancer or to detect cancer at an early, more treatable stage.

“Anytime I can help,” Whitmore said. “It makes me feel like I’m being a nurse again.”

Boston Scientific, a Marlborough-based company, established the “Close the Gap” Program to raise awareness about colorectal cancer and the importance of regular screenings as well as to eliminate treatment disparities across the nation. One recent campaign

raised more than \$20,000 which will be used to fund a new screening assistance program for underserved populations who would not otherwise get screened.

“We make it a priority to educate the public and our own employees about the importance of routine colorectal cancer screenings through procedures such as a colonoscopy,” said David Pierce, senior vice president of Boston Scientific. “Through [the Close the Gap] program, we have supported numerous initiatives to raise awareness about colorectal cancer and to improve access to preventative screenings.”

Whitmore is also a volunteer at the Colon Cancer Alliance, the largest national patient advocacy organization, and has traveled to Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress to continue funding for digestive disease disorders.

“I like knowing I’m helping people who hear my story,” she said. “It makes me proud.”

Whitmore is now a patient of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, where she will continue to receive palliative chemotherapy for the rest of her life. She is also starting a clinical trial that she hopes will give her extra time with her husband and sons, Matthew, 18, Max, 13, Tyler, 10, and Trevor, 9.

Given her diagnosis two and a half years ago, Whitmore is grateful to be able to go on a cruise to the Bahamas in April with her family and attend Matthew’s graduation from Marlborough High School in May.

“Get screened,” Whitmore stressed. “It’s no big deal to get a colonoscopy—you are under anesthesia. It’s not embarrassing. It’s not scary. This diagnosis of advanced metastatic colon cancer, what I have gone through, and what my family has endured, is scary.”

Reprinted courtesy of  
**CommunityAdvocate.com**

March 28, 2014

ENDO-237632-AA APRIL 2014