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Breast Cancer Awareness a Family Affair For Melrosian in Her 11th 'Against The Tide' Swim

Nancy Dean is swimming in a cancer-research fundraiser to honor her mother and to encourage families to talk openly about the disease.

By [Mary Cresse](#) | [Email the author](#) | June 8, 2011 [Print](#)

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Emilie Dean has never known a life untouched by breast cancer.

In 1994, her mother, Gail, was diagnosed with the disease while pregnant with Emilie. The word came just two months after Emilie's grandmother, Cecilia, had died from the same illness.

By the time Emilie was six, she began to develop more solid questions about "why Mommy was sick," according to her aunt, Nancy Dean. So her family began to speak to her, in terms a child her age could understand, more specifically about this illness called cancer.

Nancy Dean recalls telling her niece about her appointment to get a mammogram. A mammogram, she explained, was a special test, an X-ray, that looked through a woman's skin. It could help doctors find out if the tissue, or group of cells, in a person's body had any problems. The sooner doctors saw a problem, the sooner they could treat it.

"I told her how it could help prevent cancer," Dean said. "Then she said she was very sad about her mother. Then I said, 'Well, I am getting this test so that no one ever has to feel [that sadness] ever again.'" (According to the [American College of Radiology](#), mammography screening, which began at a national level in the 1980s, has contributed to a 30 percent drop in breast cancer deaths since 1990.)

But Dean is quick to mention that she was only following her brother's lead. From the start, she said, Emilie's father, Richard, led the way in ensuring Emilie knew about treatment and prevention of cancer.

"He did it all," said Dean. "To this day, he makes sure she gets regular medical checkups and keeps up on all the news about breast cancer so she'll know about it."

On June 18, Nancy Dean will swim in [Against the Tide](#), an event organized by the [Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition](#) (MBCC), a grassroots advocacy organization begun in 1991. Now in its 20th year, the fundraiser was created to draw awareness to the core causes of breast cancer. Participants will gather at Hopkinton State Park to enter up to three of the five events, including a one-mile competitive or recreational swim, a two-mile kayak trip, and three-mile walk or run. (5K)

Close to home, close to work

Nancy Dean first swam in Against the Tide on July 16, 1994, 17 days before her mother's death. As she does every year, Dean swims the event in memory of her mother, in honor of her sister-in-law, and in acknowledgment of the strength shown by two cousins who have dealt with the disease.

Close to home, Dean's mission is also reflected in her work.

Dean is employed as a laboratory technologist at [Tufts Medical Center](#) in Boston. With the goal of providing timely and accurate lab results, lab techs play an important role in the detection and diagnosis of disease. As a histologist, Dean is trained in preparing human tissue samples for

examination by doctors. This will help them determine, for example, if a person may have breast cancer.

According to research from the MBCC, Massachusetts' breast cancer rate is nearly 10 percent higher than the national average, with some women in Greater Boston and Cape Cod bearing some of the highest risk for breast cancer in the world. More than 1 in 8 women risk a breast cancer diagnosis during their lifetime; and though breast cancer is typically a disease affecting older women, more and more younger women are being diagnosed with very aggressive forms of the disease.

Fundraisers not just for athletes

Since 1994, Dean has swum in 11 events. She wants everyone to know that one does not have to be an athlete to contribute. By her own admission she is not an athlete.

"I was never a competitive swimmer," she said. "I swim slowly, at a steady rate."

Over the years, Dean has seen large corporations expand upon the advocacy of such grassroots organizations as the MBCC. However, she worries that the mission might be lost amid the parades and pink ribbons and parties.

"I'm glad people are raising money, but that sends the wrong message, if that's all you're looking at."

Dean recalled with chagrin one event at which those who raised the most money were cheered the loudest.

"That's not the only reason we're there," she said. "Look at me: I don't raise a lot of money. I don't swim fast and I can't swim a long way. Obviously I would like to raise more, but I also am swimming because I hope I can make one person stop and think and say, 'Hey, maybe I should talk to my own niece or daughter or sister about breast cancer.'

"I don't want people ever to forget that this issue is always close to home."

If you are interested in pledging for Dean, go to <http://www.firstgiving.com/againstthetide-hopkinton> for more details. For information on registering for the the Against the Tide event, [click here](#).

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