

Faces of HMEA - August 2005

Cathy Stockwell is the Manager of Boston Road in Sutton. Hired as a relief staff over 9 years ago, she was hired to a regular position and quickly promoted to Assistant and then Manager. She states that she never planned on working in this field but once in it, she felt that this was what she was supposed to do with her life. "Working in this field has been one of the best growth experiences in my life; I've learned so much from the people I support."



In September 2003, Cathy asked the doctor about what appeared to be just a small discolored area on her lower leg; the diagnosis was cancer. The first time Cathy heard the word "cancer" was one of the most difficult times in her life. During surgery, it became evident that the cancer was deep rooted and required far more extensive surgery than anyone had anticipated. She underwent several surgeries, which included skin grafts, and chemotherapy for a year. This left Cathy weak and, at times, depressed. She needed to depend on others to bring her back and forth for treatments, shopping etc.

Cathy states that, the first time she went food shopping after surgery, the feeling of being "different" was very apparent. She didn't have the energy to push a shopping cart, so she needed to use a motorized one. She had no idea how much physical work and concentration it would take to maneuver the cart through the store to do a simple thing like food shopping. She was physically and mentally drained from a task that most of us do mindlessly. At other times, she found that she and her daughter had to do extensive research on her condition so she would

know best how to advocate for her health care, since she was unable to get that information from one or more of her doctors. These experiences have helped her become more mindful and sensitive to others. One of the things she learned was how it feels to be "different". She has developed a new appreciation for the men and women supported at HMEA. She states the people we support need all the advocacy support that we can offer so others do not put them off.

When asked what it was like going from an independent healthy person to having her world turned upside down with worries about mortality, money, work, and how to just get through another day, Cathy stated that her minister asked her the same thing. Her response was that she felt like she was in a cocoon, wrapped up in someone's protection. "I somehow knew that when my ordeal was over, a beautiful butterfly would emerge from the cocoon and I would be free." Cathy's cocoon consisted of her strong faith and the overwhelming generosity and support of the people at her church, family, friends, coworkers, and others at HMEA. She states she was made to feel secure that she would have a job, money, things she needed, and, most importantly, her health benefits. Accepting help from others, Cathy said, was "all I had along with the power of prayer". Coincidentally, a coworker, Annie, gave her the jeweled butterfly that she cherishes; Annie was unaware of Cathy's conversation with her minister.

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Cathy feels she has truly learned to “not sweat the little things in life”. She believes that this experience has helped her to really listen to people and appreciate their ideas and wishes. It’s helped her to open her mind and try to derive inspiration from the things around her. She spoke of her 90-year-old neighbor who is an avid gardener and who is in his yard from 7:30 in the morning until dusk, taking care of his plants. She said that there were days when she was feeling weak and depressed, not wanting to get out of bed. She would look out her window and see her elderly neighbor and become inspired to get up. Cathy tearfully told a story of another colleague, Karen, who sent her cards every week. This small gesture gave her something

to look forward to. Karen sent her a card when she had completed her treatment and said, “I’m proud to know you”. Cathy somehow seems surprised that someone would be proud to know her.

Her philosophy on life is that we have all been placed on this earth to help one another; that life’s journey is filled with all kinds of experiences that are different for all of us. Through these experiences, we are given a great opportunity to learn and grow. “Even though we are different, we can make a positive difference in each other’s lives and in the lives of the people we support at HMEA.” ◀

*Thanks to **Jule Gomes Noack**, Diversity
Committee member, who interviewed Cathy*