



Connie Bramer,

Leaving the World Better One Family at a Time

*Connie with her two children,
Alyssa & Alex*

COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo

Photos by MarkBolles.com

Connie Bramer has one rule in her house. “We have to have one good belly laugh a day. Sometimes we laugh at each other, which is ok too. It is important to laugh. Even in the darkest of times, there is humor. If you look for it, your heart will be lighter.” She would know. A single mom of two, Connie was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 39. She used humor to help get herself through, and in the process, found her life mission.

Originally from Northville, NY, Connie enjoyed the benefits of growing up on Sacandaga Lake and having fun outdoors water skiing, swimming, snowmobiling and skiing. Her family owned a car dealership and they would often come to the auto auction on Rt. 146 in Clifton Park. Little did she know, she would eventually build a house

right down the road.

She received her BS in Psychology from SUNY Plattsburgh and has specialized training in automobile finance and management for her job as a finance trainer and financial product provider in the automotive industry. She knew she always wanted to help people, but it wasn’t until Connie was going through her own cancer journey that the fire inside her kicked up for a specific purpose. “While I was sitting in the chemo chair for a treatment one day, I thought, ‘What if I could do something to help people like me?’” She knew she needed to help others struggling with cancer as well.

Through her treatment, she used the Caring Bridge platform to blog to her family and friends to keep them updated on how she was doing. They were also able to write encouraging words and messages back to her. “I



GYRB Fundraiser at a Siena Women's Cancer Benefit Basketball Game

didn't realize it at the time," she says, "but it truly was therapy for me. One of my dear friends told me when I was well that she missed my writing. Once I was deemed in remission, I had stopped writing about my every day antics. She told me she thought my story might help others who are facing a cancer diagnosis. I thought about it and decided that it might be good therapy for me to write about it. It was definitely a time for me to reflect on where I had been as I read through all of my posts. I am often called a Pollyanna, so when I wrote my book, I wrote the real behind-the-scenes struggles intermingled with my blog posts."

The book was initially about her own struggle with cancer, but as she met other cancer patients, she realized it was every patient's struggle. Her book, *How Connie Got Her Rack Back*, is real. It shows all sides of cancer – the good, the bad, and the ugly. But through it all, Connie's snarky sense of humor shines through, giving readers laugh-out-loud moments, as well as allowing them to witness Connie's poignant moments of self-discovery throughout her journey.

After the book was published in 2012, Connie realized she could do more. She started Get Your Rack Back (GYRB), a non-profit that provides local cancer patients and their families with meal delivery, gas, grocery and restaurant gift cards, as well as physician/hospital co-pay assistance. They do not raise funds for cancer research. Their mission is to directly impact the lives of local families affected by cancer.

Connie reminisces about starting the program, "The whole impetus for this mission came from my own experience where my friend, John, from high school, had meals delivered to my home when I was undergoing chemotherapy. My kids were little and I can't even begin to convey how wonderful it was to receive those meals. My dream when I started fundraising in 2012 was to get to a point where I could do the same for others. When I started GYRB in 2015, that dream came to fruition. Although meal delivery was initially my mission, it became abundantly clear that the greatest needs for local cancer patients are grocery gift cards and medical co-pay assistance."

The meals are provided by 9 Miles East Farm in Schuylerville and delivered right to the patient's home. They also provide restaurant gift cards if a patient would like local delivery. GYRB works directly with local oncology offices and hospitals to provide these services to area patients. Connie says that nurse navigators know what patients are most in need of their services and they send

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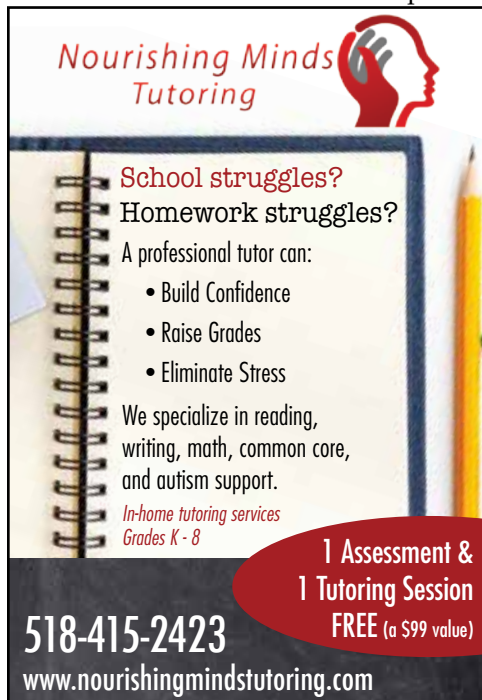

over an intake form for review. An individual patient can just ask their provider about GYRB services and ask that they reach out to Connie for assistance.

GYRB hosts three annual events in addition to other periodic events: The Funny Bone – a comedy event in Albany on March 19th; GYRB Gala at Excelsior Springs, Saratoga on June 10th; and Diamonds in December – a Christmas stocking drive that takes place every December. Connie has three rules for their fundraisers. “One, you have to have a great time. Two, I want you to say, ‘That was a classy event,’ and three, that you know your money went to a great cause. As long as we at GYRB continue with that mission for our donors, we will remain a fundraising force in our community so we can help more families. Cancer affects everyone in some way, and until it is eradicated, GYRB will be here to help as many families as we can.”

They are also always in need of volunteers. Active community members can join committees for their events, assist with delivering the gift baskets to oncology offices and become involved with the GYRB Board of Directors.

Connie lives with her children, Alyssa (16) and Alex (15), and their very energetic yellow lab, Callie. Her kids both play soccer and are also involved in their community through service organizations at Shen. Connie’s other mission is to make sure her children grow up to be good people and to help others. “My mother had a saying that I live by and often share with my kids,” she says. “Leave people better for having known you.”

Connie strives to live that motto every day and offers hope for other cancer patients. Her advice is to take things one day at a time. “Get through the day and then tomorrow will be here and you will get through that day too. When you are ‘in it’ as I say, it is difficult to look ahead at all you have to endure to be well. One step in front of the other,



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one day at a time, and hopefully, this will soon be in your rearview mirror.”

She also has great advice for family members and friends that are struggling to support someone they love going through treatment. “The one thing I learned about myself when I was diagnosed is that I didn’t



Connie with her gal pals at the GYRB fundraiser at Siena

want to talk about it all the time and I found out from my friends that they were embarrassed to tell me of their life adventures when I was going through so much. Cancer patients want to feel normal and be treated normal. So to friends, to acknowledge the cancer, ask how your friend is and if he or she needs anything. Then tell them a funny story. The worst thing about having cancer is you wake up thinking you have cancer and you go to bed with those thoughts in your head as well. We need our friends to make our lives normal. Don’t lose sight of that.”

Connie’s core values of humor, helping others and kindness not only helped her through her difficult journey and allowed her to realize her dream, it has also spread hope to others struggling as well, and her message rings true for all of us in our days ahead: “Be kind to one another. Make an effort and take the time to do one selfless act a day for someone you don’t know. Hold a door for someone, buy coffee for the person behind you in line. Kindness spurs on kindness. If we all can treat each other this way, the world will be a better place. Leave people better for having known you, even if it is just in passing.”

To learn more about GYRB or to order Connie’s book, *How Connie Got Her Rack Back*, visit www.getyourrackback.org. ■

Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share? Nominate your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at jcaputo@bestversionmedia.com.