

New Haven Register



The Solsbury family of Ansonia, pictured from left: Brandon Solsbury with Bailey, Keith Solsbury, Maggie Solsbury, and a cousin, Paul Begnoche. Missing from photo: daughter Brianna Solsbury. Patricia Villers/Register

Ansonia family seeks to raise cancer awareness

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Patricia Villers, Register Staff

ANSONIA -- Getting the word out about esophageal cancer is at the top of resident Maggie Solsbury's to-do list.

Solsbury's husband, Keith Solsbury, is a five-year survivor of the disease. He was diagnosed in January 2006. He had surgery to remove his esophagus and two-thirds of his stomach, after which he underwent intense chemotherapy treatments.

Keith Solsbury, 48, can no longer work.

Maggie Solsbury said that April is National Esophageal Cancer Awareness Month and that awareness is vital to fight the disease.

Maggie Solsbury is afraid that they will lose their home. "We're financially bankrupt and in danger of losing the house," she said. "But I'm more concerned with making people aware" of the disease.

She said she realizes that with the poor economy, many people are struggling and she doesn't expect financial help. Her goal is to stop esophageal cancer from hurting other families.

"We definitely have a lot of issues going on, but I can't stop my fight," Maggie Solsbury said.

The Solsburys have two children: Brandon, 20, and Brianna, 18.

Maggie Solsbury said she recently learned of a 19-year-old man in Buffalo, N.Y., who is struggling with Stage 4 esophageal cancer. She said finding out about him really hit home, since he is in the same age group as her children.

Maggie Solsbury said her husband's serious illness has been difficult on Brandon and Brianna, who have helped care for their father since the beginning. She said they both suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and insomnia. They no longer attend public school, but are completing work online for their high school diplomas.

Dr. Harold Schwartz, gastroenterologist at Griffin Hospital, said, "People who have heartburn on a regular basis more than two or three times a week over a five-year period need to be screened."

An endoscopy catches Barrett's esophagus, which is a change in the lining caused by chronic damage from acid reflux.

Schwartz said a higher risk is found in white men over age 50, and in people who have chronic alcohol and tobacco use. He said anyone who has issues of swallowing and is losing weight should be evaluated.

Maggie Solsbury has posted her family's story at www.ecan.org.

She wrote in part: "(On Jan. 3, 2006) our GI doctor called for us to make an appointment. For five years Keith had a condition called Barrett's Esophagus, which is caused by having acid reflux. I knew if they were calling us to come in it was bad. Keith had advanced to adenocarcinoma of the esophagus."

Last year, Brianna wrote an essay called "One Word!" which referred to the word "cancer."

"I'll never forget going into the (intensive care unit," she wrote. "It didn't even look like him. He was lifeless and had tubes in his throat, nose, and sides. I talked to him hoping he would talk back, but because of the tubes in his throat and the amount of pain medication he needed it was like I was talking to a ghost. When I left the hospital at night I felt like I was abandoning him and it tore me up inside."

Brianna also said: "I needed to grow up faster than my friends. I learned to be strong and grateful that God gave me my daddy back. To this day, I cannot think of what it would be like to lose him. My Dad helped open my eyes to cherish the time you have with each other and not fight over petty stuff. I learned to appreciate the little things and the little time we have with the ones we love. This crazy journey has made me into a strong, good hearted woman."

Keith Solsbury was 170 pounds when he fell sick, and is now at about 103 pounds, up from 85 pounds, he said.

Since he has a small stomach, he needs to eat several little meals a day. He also has permanent nerve damage in his stomach.

"I was a forced gastric bypass patient," Keith Solsbury said.

Maggie Solsbury said her husband gets extremely tired and has his good days and his bad days, but the family is tight and works together to help him.