

BATTLING BREAST CANCER A TIMES-NEWS SPECIAL REPORT

HEAR IT

The fourth annual Pickin' on Cancer fundraiser with Silverlight for StringsforaCure Foundation is Friday at 6:30 p.m. at the Clarion Lake Erie & Bel-Aire Conference Center. It includes a silent auction for Jon Bon Jovi and Melissa Etheridge jewelry. Tickets are \$60 per person; a limited amount will be available at the door. For more on the organization, including featured jewelry, see www.stringsforacure.org.

SEE THE SILVERLIGHT

Silverlight has played each and every Pickin' on Cancer fundraiser, but Friday's show will be a bit different.

Bill Arnold, one of the band's original members, now lives in Florida and can't make it. Guitarist Tim McLaughlin and Mike Miller will replace him and expand the band's classic-rock set.

"They've got their repertoire that's going to be merged with ours," said bassist Derf Hopseger. "And Mike's wife, Marie, will join us on a few songs. Mike Miller is bringing in the bulk of the Elvis (Presley) and some other country tunes. Tim is bringing in Canned Heat and some of the James Gang tunes, too."

The group also figures to play songs by the Doobie Brothers, Buddy Guy and the Beatles, a favorite of StringsforaCure founder Elisa Guida.

"Elisa was hoping to really have some good dance for the folks, and that's what we're focusing on," said Hopseger, who'll be joined by Silverlight's Chuck Leone (keys) and Rik Cass (drums).

The show will feature a poignant highlight. Cancer survivors will join together to sing Melissa Etheridge's "I Run for Life." Etheridge, fittingly, is one of nearly 100 musicians who've donated used strings to StringsforaCure and she's also a cancer survivor.

— Dave Richards

FOR A CAUSE: How musicians joined the fight against cancer

No strings attached

By Dave Richards
Staff writer

She's a jeweler, not a musician. But no one may be more gifted with strings than Elisa Guida. She turns used guitar and bass strings, donated by famous music stars, into jewelry such as pendants, rings and necklaces.

Proceeds from jewelry sales benefit StringsforaCure Foundation, the nonprofit agency she began four years ago to help women with cancer. Women like Guida, 60, who's battled breast cancer twice.

So far, approximately 100 artists — including Jon Bon Jovi, Pat Monahan, Carlos Santana, Chris Daughtry, Melissa Etheridge, Willie Nelson and Bret Michaels — have donated their used strings and — in turn — helped more than 1,000 Erie-area women.

The organization provides financial assistance to cancer patients, as well as medical grants, comfort baskets, educational and emotional support.

Guida — a longtime music fan — brainstormed the idea in 2008, just three years after she faced her second bout with breast cancer.

"I'm a jeweler by trade," she said. "And in 2008, Ed (Saloum, her husband) and I were at a Bon Jovi concert in Pittsburgh, and I came up with the idea of getting famous musicians to donate their used guitar strings. I'd design the jewelry, and help people with breast cancer."

Helping via musicians made sense. Guida was 9 when she saw the Beatles on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and became a fan for life. When the Beatles played Philadelphia, she headed downtown to try to spot them, to no avail.

"We were in all the chaos," she said, "but they brought them in in



SARAH CROSBY/Erie Times-News

Elisa Guida, 60, a two-time breast cancer survivor and founder of StringsforaCure, provides support for the breast cancer community by raising funds through one-of-a-kind jewelry made using guitar strings donated by famous musicians. Guida displays earrings made with strings from Jonny Buckland, left, and strings from Melissa Etheridge.

a fish truck."

When she was just 17, a Philadelphia radio station offered a pair of concert tickets to a lucky caller.

Guida won them and saw George Harrison's legendary Concert for

Bangladesh from the third row with a zillion stars.

"Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Billy Preston, Leon Russell, George Harrison, Ringo Starr (were there), and do you know what? I wanted John

Lennon to come," she said. "John was supposed to come, and then he (didn't) at the last minute. When Dylan came on, the place went crazy. Me and my girlfriend just sat there because we wanted Lennon.

I'm in the movie five times!"

She hopes to get Paul McCartney's bass strings at some point — that's her biggest dream — but securing Bruce Springsteen guitar strings would be cool, too, she said.

She doesn't often meet the celebrities who donate but did get to chat with Daughtry and Michaels.

In 1995, meeting music stars was the last thing on her mind.

"I was 40 years old, a newlywed and was actually hoping to start a family with my husband. Instead, I got (a) breast cancer diagnosis," Guida said. "I was young."

She was shocked.

"I had no lump," she said. "If women are just waiting to feel a lump during their self exams, I did not feel a lump. I had suspicious mammograms, and then, of course, I had biopsies, which diagnosed the breast cancer."

Following lumpectomy, lymph-node removal and radiation treatments, her breast cancer went into remission though her right arm remained numb for nine and a half years — not great for a jeweler.

"I didn't let it stop me. Life went on," Guida said. "Then, when the sensation started coming back, that's when I was diagnosed again."

In November, 2005, she was diagnosed not only with a recurrence but a rare, invasive tubular breast cancer as well. This time, though, she recovered more quickly.

"It was a miracle. I had a mastectomy on a Monday, I was home on a Tuesday, and I was out grocery shopping on a Friday. I had no pain, and I had no bruising, but I attribute that to my wonderful surgeon," Guida said. "And I have strong faith. I had a healing performed on me a week prior to my surgery," she said.

2015 marks the 10th and 20th anniversaries of her cancer bouts. So far, she's fine.

"I was checked this year; things are good," Guida said. "I don't celebrate. I'm not one of the ones that celebrates. I'm just thankful, every day, for good health."



PATTI LARSON/Contributed photos

The StringsforaCure Foundation made the burden easier for Catherine Datte, left, and Elnora Johnson.

Who's been helped

Catherine Datte needed to make frequent trips during winter to the Cleveland Clinic for cancer treatments and didn't want her daughter shouldering the burden for all that fuel. Elnora Johnson needed an expensive type of soap for radiation burns sustained during cancer treatment.

StringsforaCure Foundation helped them both with those issues and more. The nonprofit agency, based in Erie, provides financial assistance — such as grocery, gas and pharmacy cards — as well as medical grants to help cancer patients, primarily those with breast cancer.

"My daughter was coming to help me; she drove six hours with her baby — a year-and-a-half-old baby — to take me to Cleveland for treatment and bring me back," said Datte, 60, the director of Gannon University Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. "So, when I filled out the application (for StringsforaCure) and got a card in the mail, I kind of broke down in tears and said, 'Oh, my God — they really do this.'

"I was able to let my daughter use it for gas, and it funded two full round trips of driving back and forth."

Johnson moved from Philadelphia back to Erie in 2014 to be near her family while dealing with cancer.

"Moving back to Erie was scary for me; I was in the middle of radiation," said Johnson, who moved on Christmas Eve. The American Cancer Society directed her to StringsforaCure Foundation, which helped her secure a Wal-Mart gift card.

"I was able to get the products I needed for my skin, which were very expensive," said Johnson, 47. "Those are things that medical cards don't pay for."

StringsforaCure also provided her with emotional support. She took part in the organization's Faces of Strings photo shoot for a poster featuring women helped by the organization.

"When they asked me to do the photo shoot," Johnson said, "it lifted my spirits because I felt like I was so ugly because of everything I was going through. But when I looked at the pictures, they were so beautiful. It was

my inner beauty. This helped me with my self-esteem, and they're so helpful with anything, like trying to find things that I needed.

"It's so wonderful," she added. "I had never heard of (the foundation) before, but everywhere I go, I tell everybody about them. It's something in Erie that's really helped me, and I'm very thankful."

Johnson said she's still battling breast cancer. "Every day is a struggle, but I'm better than I was," she said. Datte is doing well; she says regular exercise and a positive attitude helped her, in addition to surgery and treatments. She'll attend Friday's StringsforaCure Foundation fundraiser and plans to do more to help organization founder Elisa Guida.

"My personal goal is to help raise funds for her project and her programs," Datte said. Guida said StringsforaCure has helped more than 825 patients with more than \$124,000 in direct aid, including 50 medical grants for medical bills and equipment.

— Dave Richards