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Looking for Silver Linings After Conquering Cancer, Wilton's Donna Savage Aims to Help Others

by **Jarret Liotta** April 5, 2023

Donna Savage with Dr. Saral Mehra, Surgical Oncologist who will be speaking at a head and neck cancer awareness event on Saturday, April 8. Credit: Donna Savage

The formidable experience of contracting oropharyngeal cancer brought life-changing tribulations to **Donna Savage**, but unexpected opportunities to share her experience and hope with others have likewise provided some "silver linings" in her life.

That's why Savage, a well-known Wilton mom, has organized a **free head and neck cancer awareness event** this **Saturday afternoon, April 8**, at **The Wilton Playshop** that will include free screenings from Yale Cancer Center professionals for all interested parties.

"This cancer is a silent killer," Savage said. "It's on the rise. It's hard to detect and oftentimes it gets detected at a later stage."

April is **Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Month** and Savage didn't want it to pass without offering something to her community, based on her own experiences. She said that since the pandemic, opportunities for free in-person screenings like this have been nearly impossible to hold, so this represents a good chance for people to be checked.

The event will include a talk from **Dr. James Aris**, a Wilton dentist who will speak about oral hygiene and care as the frontline of this particular cancer. **Dr. Saral** Mehra, a surgeon with the Smilow Cancer Hospital, who was Savage's oncologist, will also speak and oversee the screenings.

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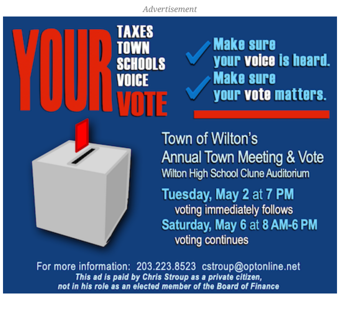

At Home in the Playshop

A longtime board member at the Playshop, Savage, who turns 60 in June, felt that this beloved theater community of hers was the ideal venue for what she hopes is an intimate and meaningful event.

Donna Savage sings onstage at Wilton Rocks for Food 2022 Credit: Jeff Johnson

As an amateur performer and singer, contracting this particular kind of cancer was at first a seeming dagger to Savage, who initially didn't know how extensively her vocal cords would be impacted, nor whether she would even ever sing again.

"I've been singing most of my life," she said. "That was one of my biggest concerns when I learned I had this diagnosis."

Her condition, for which she ultimately completed treatment last year, did adversely affect her vocal range, but ironically it's no longer as important a concern for her. Though she still sings, her interests have expanded to encompass raising awareness about the illness with which she contended.

"It makes you pause," she said. "I'm very completely aware of every health thing (and) just really being diligent about my health … I don't take anything for granted. Nothing."

Further, through social media outlets and other in-person connections she made during her treatment and beyond, Savage is devoting more of her time to being there for others who are facing this same situation.

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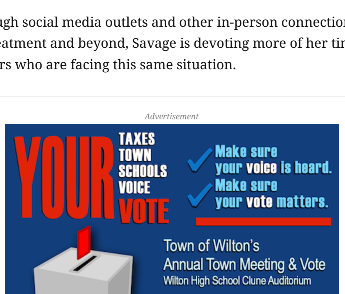

"I'm interested in the topic," she said, noting some celebrities who've experienced this particular cancer, including **Michael Douglas, Farrah Fawcett**, and **Val Kilmer**.

According to Cancer.net, an estimated 475,000 people worldwide were diagnosed with oral and oropharyngeal cancer in 2020, with rates twice as high in men as in women.

"It'll always be a big part of my life," she said, regularly following research updates and communicating with others who are facing this trial.

"I've met people who just need someone to talk to (and) next thing you know I'm talking to someone new I've never met — cancer buddies," she said.

"There's always someone worse off than you," she said. "But I feel pretty fortunate. Every day's a gift."

Silver Linings

Despite the adversities, many positives became apparent on this journey for her.

"Through the whole time there were silver linings," Savage said, including how it bonded her with her younger daughter while her older was away at college.

"She did great," she said. "It was hard for her because it was scary."

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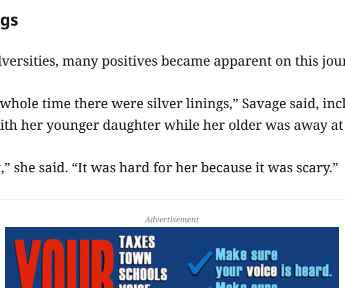

Savage's situation first began in 2021, when she became aware of a pronounced sensitivity in swallowing, with snoring and acid reflux subsequent symptoms. At first, her ear, nose and throat doctor did not express cause for concern, but after she experienced swollen lymph nodes for a prolonged period, they suggested a biopsy be done.

"It was like slow motion," she said. "I called him and he said, 'We found cancer.'"

Despite the shock, Savage said she was familiar with tragedy and trauma, having lost two of her six siblings when she was much younger.

"I was certainly scared," she said, "but I leaned on my faith, and on my family."

As 2022 began, her husband, **Brad Savage**, and her daughters, **Ella** and **Sophia**, stepped up with care and courage. Savage gets teary speaking about the love and affection they poured upon her.

Many friends also made themselves available as she embarked on the seven-week schedule of radiation and chemotherapy.

"I was lucky not to lose a lot of functionality," she said, maintaining her abilities to swallow and chew, despite the marked decrease in appetite that comes with treatment.

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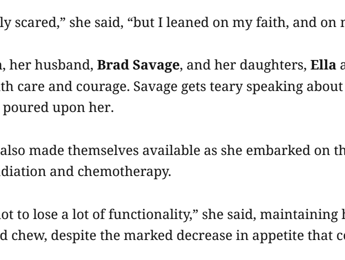

"Monday through Friday it was radiation every day," she said, along with "needles galore" for testing blood and the like.

"I was treated at Yale and I can't say enough about it," she said. "I had great care there."

Donna Savage documented much of her cancer journey and shared it to raise awareness about head and neck cancers. Credit: Donna Savage

One complication that arose, however, was that doctors couldn't absolutely confirm the cancer was gone, prompting Savage to make the choice to have a modified bilateral neck dissection to remove her lymph nodes.

"I had to do it," she said, figuring it a wiser choice than leaving it to chance. Consequently, she learned she was cancer-free.

"I feel pretty fortunate," Savage said. "Not everybody has the same access to healthcare."

But especially with the value in early detection for this particular condition, she said she's glad to be holding an event that may give others the chance to avoid what she went through, or at least help let it be no worse.

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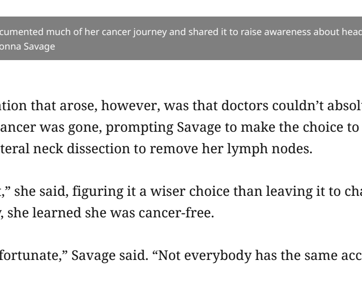
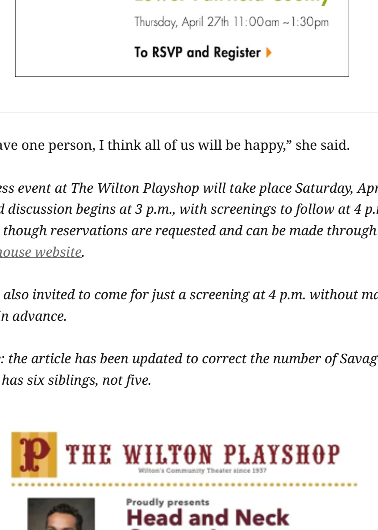


"If we can save one person, I think all of us will be happy," she said.

The awareness event at The Wilton Playshop will take place Saturday, April 8. Speakers and discussion begins at 3 p.m., with screenings to follow at 4 p.m. The event is free, though reservations are requested and can be made through [The Wilton Playhouse website](#).

The public is also invited to come for just a screening at 4 p.m. without making a reservation in advance.

Editor's note: the article has been updated to correct the number of Savage's siblings. She has six siblings, not five.



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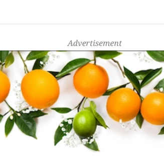

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- APR 18 — April 18 @ 8:00 am - May 16 @ 10:00 am — **Spring Migration 2023 – Birding Walks at Allen's Meadow**
- APR 18 — 4:30 pm - 5:30 pm — **Teen Library Council**
- APR 18 — 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm — **Wilton Reads: Wilton Go Green Community Awards**

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