



Hills city councilwoman featured in documentary on suicide, depression

By Sherri Kolade

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FARMINGTON HILLS — Farmington Hills City Councilwoman Samantha Steckloff has a story to tell, and she's ready for thousands to hear it.

In a recently released documentary, "Death Is Not the Answer," Detroit-based director and producer Keith Famie explores suicide and depression, and he interviewed Steckloff, among others, on the subject matter.

Steckloff, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2015 and experienced bouts of depression, said that she is much happier now because she wants to live.

"That does not mean days are easy," Steckloff said, adding that she, however, learned to prioritize. "You'll figure out what does not matter and what does."

The Public Broadcasting Service documentary premiere features mental health professionals and explores finding contentment and happiness through mind- body health, diet, music and more.

Individuals featured in the film include firefighters, first responders and police personnel, including Oakland County Sheriff Mike Bouchard and Detroit Police Chief James Craig.

The film wants to offer hope and a better knowledge about depression and what leads to suicide, according to the press release. The broadcast of this two-part series debuted on Detroit Public Television at 8 p.m. Nov. 11. A film screening was scheduled for Nov. 6 at Emagine Royal Oak.

"I was more than honored," Steckloff said of being featured in the documentary.

Steckloff, 32, was diagnosed with breast cancer and made her diagnosis public during a City Council study session last June shortly after she found out. Steckloff said she discovered a lump along the line of her bikini top when she was putting on aloe vera in late May. Steckloff said she also had been experiencing health issues such as weight gain and hair loss, and she did not know if the problems were related.



Farmington Hills City Councilwoman Samantha Steckloff is featured in the documentary "Death Is Not the Answer," where she talks about depression. This photo of her is featured in the documentary. (Photo provided by Samantha Steckloff)

It was confirmed that she had the most common type of breast cancer, invasive ductal carcinoma — which accounts for about 80 percent of all breast cancers — and she underwent surgery to remove lymph nodes.

She was interviewed for the documentary in April at a park in Walled Lake. “I just remember my responses were constantly ended with, ‘I don’t want to die,’” she said of the documentary questions.

She said she was devastated by the diagnosis and that there were days when she didn’t think she could continue. She contemplated the possibility of suicide to ease her suffering, according to a press release. Now, however, when she reflects on that time, she can’t imagine how she felt that way because she wants to truly live.

“Boom, I get diagnosed and the last thing I think about is dying. ... All you want to do is live and you fight (for) every last breath,” Steckloff said. Steckloff added that she also experienced bouts of depression before the cancer diagnosis when her 58-year-old uncle passed away due to a possible aneurysm on Christmas Day 2014.

“It was just one of the deaths in the family; it resonated with me until June, when I was diagnosed,” she said. “All I could think about for some reason is he wanted to live life, and here I am struggling with every day-to-day task, and at one point you think, ‘I wish I could switch places with him because I want him to be alive.’ They talk about depression is a disease — doesn’t have any rhyme or reason; mine was definitely focused on a death in the family.”

Famie said the documentary is a call to action that might somehow impact others, the way they live, and help people navigate their lives. “This subject was really a big one,” he said, adding that bringing this story to light shows something else, too. “It’s OK to talk about.”

Farmington Hills Mayor Ken Massey, who oversees Farmington Suicide Awareness for Everyone, a Farmington-area suicide prevention task force, is all about talking, and he said recently that having a conversation on the topic is difficult, but necessary.

“We need to get past the idea that there is a stigma,” he said, adding that when people in need speak out, they can get help and find resources. “When people are having suicidal thoughts, they feel very alone and they think it is just them and that people would be bothered. ... Truth is, people want to help you.” Massey said that Farmington SAFE has had many community conversations on various topics to make sure people realize they are not alone.

Steckloff said she discovered, too, that she was not by herself in her cancer journey because of newfound friends in her cancer support group.

“Last year over Thanksgiving in (my) support group ... our leader asked us what we are thankful for, and my cancer diagnosis is what I am thankful for,” she said, adding that with her new friends and new outlook on life, things are different. The pain is still there, constantly, she said, and the days are not always easy. But she would not trade it for her former outlook on life.

“Not that I have an awful, terrible life,” she said, adding that the day-to-day drudgery can wear one down.

Her caution to other women is to do self-breast exams regularly, and she gently warns them that “you’re not invincible.”

“I don’t want anyone to get that phone call,” she said, adding that her body is getting used to some of the medication she is on. “I try to keep it positive.”