

Let's Pink the Towns

Last September, Rebecca Matthews decided to cover her town in pink. Pink lawn signs that is. It was all in an effort to raise funding for breast cancer research and awareness. And it worked. The unique campaign took off, raising more money than Rebecca could ever have dreamed. So this year, she's got her sights set on turning the whole province pink!



Rebecca recovering after breast surgery.

All photos courtesy of Rebecca Matthews

Rebecca is a breast cancer patient herself. In 2019 she learned she had three different cancers in her breasts – two of which were very invasive – and immediately underwent a double mastectomy. But surgery was just the beginning. Eighteen rounds of chemotherapy followed. Then twenty-five rounds of radiation. And her battle continues. She has since learned she carries what is called the BRCA2 mutation,

which puts her at ongoing risk of further cancer.

Rebecca is not alone, either. It is estimated that about one in eight Canadian women will develop breast cancer during their lifetime. One in 33 will die from it. And in 2020 alone, 75 Canadian women were diagnosed with breast cancer every day. These are frightening statistics.

So frightening in fact, that Rebecca decided she wanted to do something about them. That's when she came up with the idea for Pink the Towns.

"I wanted to do something positive for Breast Cancer Awareness month," Rebecca explains. "Something that would bring the whole community together in support of breast cancer patients and survivors – while still isolating due to Coronavirus."

Pink Town Signs

Struck by how inspiring it was to see signs supporting front line workers throughout the pandemic, she conceived of a lawn sign campaign for breast cancer. "I thought if we could get some signs out just across my own community, it would bring hope to those suffering with breast cancer," she says. "Not only that, but we could raise some money for research and help increase awareness around the disease."

Recruiting her best friend, Amie Vandevenne, to help, Rebecca set to work. In a matter of two days a Facebook group called 'Paint the Town Pink' was formed and the campaign was officially underway. It didn't take long to capture the community's attention.

"People started joining the group in huge numbers, with everyone wanting to know how they could order a lawn sign," Rebecca says. "CTV news even got involved, featuring the campaign in one of their newscasts."

by Doug Archer

Rebecca had hoped to sell 500 signs at \$15 each. But through the course of two weeks, she more than doubled that goal, with 1150 signs sold and over \$13,000 raised. And for the whole month of October – Breast Awareness Month – pink signs dotted front lawns and business windows, raising awareness around this deadly disease.

While the majority of the signs were placed around Dorchester, where Rebecca lives, hundreds ended up in London, Windsor, Georgian Bay and Ottawa. And it didn't stop with the signs. Many supporters also decorated their homes with pink ribbons, pink porch lights, even pink pumpkins!

Rebecca was overwhelmed – and humbled – by the success of the campaign. But she also believes she understands why so many people stepped up to help.

"It is difficult to find anyone who hasn't been affected in some way by breast cancer," she says. "Mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, friends ... cancer is very invasive. I think the Pink the Towns campaign made people feel they could do something positive. That they could not only contribute funds to research, but by putting up a sign, they could also announce their support for those with breast cancer."

And that tremendous support was felt. Expressions of gratitude for the campaign flooded across the Pink the Towns Facebook page, says Rebecca. She heard stories from cancer patients who had driven through Dorchester and been heartened by the sea of pink signs they saw. From people who had lost a friend or relative to breast cancer, and said the campaign gave them renewed strength. She even heard from women who told her that the campaign might have saved their lives. "They told me that seeing the signs had prompted them to get a breast screening," says Rebecca. "And in some of those cases, cancer was found."



A Pink the Towns hoodie.

The success of Pink the Towns also caught the attention of Hailey Parliament, a fundraiser with the Canadian Cancer Society. Reaching out to Rebecca and Amie, the three women worked together not only to further boost

the 2020 campaign, but to discuss the potential for expanding it in 2021.

The result: this year Pink the Towns is going province-wide!

Originally called Paint the Town Pink, Rebecca's cancer campaign was rebranded to 'Pink the Towns' this past January. And a goal of selling 5,000 signs across Ontario was set.



Painting the town pink with signs and pumpkins!

"I'm excited that we will be able to exponentially raise awareness and money for breast cancer," declares Rebecca. "The more people we can reach, the bigger impact we can have against this silent killer. We want to turn the whole province pink!"

The campaign is already underway, too. Signs can be purchased for \$20 from now until June 30th. Simply go online at www.pinkthetowns.ca and click on the Sell icon. "And they're selling well," says Rebecca. Not just in Ontario, either. "We've even had people from Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec purchasing

them!" The Pink the Towns signs are biodegradable as well, in an effort to protect the environment.

All purchased signs will be packaged up by volunteers over the summer and delivered to towns and cities throughout the province in time for September pick-up. That way they can be displayed on lawns through the entire month of October – Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

"There's a contest, too," says Rebecca. "Whichever town or city purchases the most lawns signs will win a grand prize." While she's keeping the prize a secret at this point, Rebecca guarantees that it will be something to help make the winning location more beautiful. "And the competition is based on most signs per capita," she emphasizes. "So even little towns have a shot at winning."

If the goal of selling 5,000 signs is met, Rebecca and her team will more than quadruple the amount they raised last fall for breast cancer research. And that's without adding in other donations. As she explains, the campaign can be supported in a number ways, not only by purchasing a lawn sign. "We also have Pink the Towns door hangers, hoodies, T-shirts and other merchandise for sale online, with proceeds all going toward breast cancer awareness and research."

Early Detection

And while she is excited to raise even more money for breast cancer research, Rebecca believes raising awareness through the campaign is even more important. "It's about people being aware of the signs of cancer," she says. "About them checking their breasts and going for regular screening. This is how we're going to beat this disease."

She's right. According to the Canadian Cancer Society, the rate of breast cancer deaths in Canada peaked in 1986 and has been slowly declining since. The reasons: improvements in treatment for breast cancer and the positive impact of regular screenings. While no screening test is 100 per cent accurate, evidence has shown that having regular mammograms lowers the risk of dying from breast cancer.

And early detection may mean less treatment and less time spent recovering.

The Ontario Breast Screening Program recommends that women ages 50 to 74 have a mammogram every two years. And no doctor's referral is required. To schedule a screening simply go to www.cancercareontario.ca or call 1-800-668-9304. Alternatively you can contact your doctor or nurse practitioner and have them arrange the mammogram.

Women aged 40 to 49, or those who think they may be at high risk for breast cancer, should visit their family doctor. Breast cancer screenings can then be arranged based on family and medical history.

"When we started Pink the Towns last year," Rebecca says, "I thought if it could help even one person detect breast cancer early, or encourage one person to schedule a mammogram that they otherwise wouldn't have, then the campaign would have been worthwhile." With a smile she adds, "Well, it's been more than worthwhile, because I know that we've helped way more than one person do just that."

Do It Now

And don't let Coronavirus stop you. With many things postponed due to COVID-19, it may seem like a good idea to put off a breast cancer screening until vaccines have been fully rolled out. But breast cancer doesn't stop during a pandemic. According to the Canadian Cancer Society, if you are overdue for a mammogram or other screening, or detect changes in your breasts, it is important to contact your doctor sooner than later. Lives can be saved by early detection.

At the start of Rebecca's breast cancer journey, she was determined to be strong for those around her. Especially her children. She wanted to show them that if she could deal with this adversity with courage, strength and perseverance, then out of it would come hope.

Pink the Towns has given her that hope. "I'm uplifted by the support of my community and communities across Ontario," she tells me. "And encouraged by the money we are raising for breast cancer research. More than that, the stories of gratitude I hear from fellow cancer patients give me the strength to carry on dealing with my own cancer."

So step up and join in the battle against breast cancer. Go online and purchase a Pink the Towns sign – and encourage your neighbours to do the same. Let's turn Bruce County pink this October and show those who are fighting breast cancer how committed we are to supporting research and awareness.

Go to www.pinkthetowns.ca and click under Shop. And remember, the deadline for purchasing a Pink the Towns sign is June 30th.



Businesses supporting breast cancer research and awareness.