

ASBURY PARK PRESS

Beauty Ball to honor 4 fighting cancers

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TOMS RIVER — Twenty-one-year-old Rebecca Leifert thought she had finally rid herself of Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Doctors at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia told Leifert in March 2009 that she was in remission from the cancer and could resume a normal life.

"I was just so happy when I heard the news," said Leifert, a Toms River resident. "I went back to classes at Ocean County College and worked toward my associate degree in liberal arts. The feeling of being normal again and being able to get on with my life was fantastic."

It didn't last long.

In September 2010, the cancer returned.

"I was devastated but not surprised," Leifert said. "I kind of knew something was wrong. I was coughing again, having trouble breathing, feeling kind of queasy. Little things inside were telling me the cancer was back."

Leifert's courageous battle against cancer, which includes a recent stem cell transplant, is being recognized by The Beauty Foundation, a nonprofit organization that helps patients and their families with the financial and emotion burdens of coping with cancer.

Leifert is one of four New Jersey women who will be honored for their courage at The Beauty Foundation's fifth annual Beauty Ball on April 2 at Trump National Golf Club in Colts Neck. The other honorees are Phyllis Colicchio Berger of Ocean Township's West Allenhurst section, a 54-year-old teacher fighting breast cancer; Amber Marchese of Colts Neck, a 33-year-old mother of four who is now cancer-free, and Tammy Lippert of East Brunswick, a 37-year-old single mother also fighting breast cancer.

Leifert will not be able to attend the Beauty Ball because she is in "lockdown" from a stem cell transplant. She stayed at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia for nearly a month after the operation and now is confined to her Pierson Road home until early June.



Rebecca Leifert of Toms River recently had a stem cell transplant in her battle with Hodgkin's lymphoma. / STAFF PHOTO: TANYA BREEN

"I had a big dose of chemotherapy and it pretty much wiped out my entire bone marrow," explained Leifert. "Basically, I have no immune system. I have to be very careful with people in the house and I can't eat a lot of things like raw meats. The worse thing is I can't taste anything."

Though Leifert is confined, The Beauty Foundation is making plans to televise a message from her after she receives the Woman of Courage Award.

"The technology is there, and we are going to have her speak live via Skype," explained Lori Ceraolo, a member of the Beauty Foundation's board of directors. "With two laptops and a wire, everyone will be able to see and hear her message on some big screen televisions."

Ceraolo said she learned of Leifert's battle from a family member and found her to be "a perfect candidate" for the award.

"We felt compelled to help such a young girl who has endured such pain and had so many hospital stays," Ceraolo said. "To be 21 years old and be isolated like that . . . gosh, that has got to be so difficult."

Leifert said she feels honored by the recognition.

"I really appreciate it from the bottom of my heart," she said. "I wasn't expecting it. I am not used to being the center of attention. But if my experience can encourage other people who are in a similar situation, then that's great."