

Generosity Rewarded: Local Woman Participates in Oprah's Favorite Things

By Carrie Titolo, Komen Connecticut

We've all heard the saying "It is better to give than to receive", but finding those who truly live its virtue in today's society may be less common. West Hartford native, Merle Kaplan, is one of those rare people. This past November, after years of volunteerism and giving back, she finally found herself on the receiving end- at The Oprah Winfrey Show, of all places.

For Kaplan, her passion for community service all started when her mother lost her battle with breast cancer at the age of 48. After watching close friends struggle with the disease, and making difficult decisions with regard to her own breast health, Kaplan knew she wanted to get more involved with the cause. She joined the committee organizing the Play for a Cure golf tournament at Tumble Brook Country Club in Bloomfield, chairing the event in 2003 and 2004.

The tournament began in 1997, with the help of Tumble Brook Manager, Ara Daglian, who has been, in the words of tournament founder, Diane Greenfield, "continually generous and beyond supportive" throughout the years. Under the leadership of Greenfield, Kaplan and the committee, and thanks to the generosity of Tumble Brook's passionate membership, the tournament has continued to grow, contributing over \$1.26 Million to local breast cancer organization, Komen Connecticut. Komen Connecticut invests seventy-five percent of the tournament's funds in local breast cancer education, screening and treatment programs across the state, and the remaining twenty-five percent supports national research initiatives to find the causes and cures for breast cancer.

In addition to her deep-seated passion for eradicating breast cancer, Kaplan also admits to finding philanthropic inspiration from one other, somewhat unexpected, place: The Oprah Winfrey Show. Last August, Kaplan explained this inspiration in an essay to the show's producers, in an effort to win tickets to a taping. When one of the producers called her weeks later, it was her volunteerism and charity work they were interested in.

"They asked me about my fundraising efforts, and I told them all about my work with Play for A Cure and Komen," Kaplan recalls. "With 11 days notice, I got an e-mail notifying me that I had won two tickets to the show. Flights were so expensive, we almost didn't go."

Eleven days later, Kaplan and her best friend, Eileen Segal, President Elect of the Florida PTA, found themselves waiting in line hours before the taping, just in time to see the audience from the morning taping shuffle out with bags of goodies. The two were disappointed, thinking they had so narrowly missed Oprah's famous "Favorite Things" show.

“We couldn’t believe we had come so close to The Favorite Things show- that’s like hitting the lottery. We were a bit disappointed, but still excited to be there,” Kaplan said.

There were 278 people in the audience that day, and each one of them was a volunteer, fundraiser or nominated as someone’s hero. When they were finally ushered into the studio, Oprah came out, regretfully saying how tired she was from the previous show. Suddenly, little snowflakes began to fall from the ceiling, and Oprah looked out into the audience and bellowed, “It’s beginning to look a lot like favorite things!” The audience went wild, and the camera even pans to a shot of Kaplan and Segal jumping up and down with excitement.

Kaplan was further inspired by Winfrey after attending the show. “My favorite part of the whole experience was knowing that the person having the most fun in the whole room was Oprah,” Kaplan said.

Although she left with some great swag, including an iPad, pricey makeup, designer clothes and a brand new Volkswagen Beetle in the color of her choice (red), Kaplan paid it forward by giving most of it away. “I kept a couple things as mementos, but most of it was donated or given to friends and family. I was happy to share. I gave one of the Nordstrom gift cards I received to a woman who had just had a mastectomy and donated the other to a friend’s cancer fundraiser.”

Now back to normalcy and celebrating the tremendous success of this year’s 14th Annual Play for A Cure golf tournament, Kaplan gratefully recalls her Oprah experience and continues her positive attitude toward volunteerism and philanthropy. “Oprah always said that her Favorite Things show has nothing to do with things- it is about knowing that at any moment, you can get a little back for what you’ve put it,” Kaplan said.