

## **STARTING A STUDENT ORGANIZATION- THE REWARDING JOURNEY OF PROTECT OUR BREASTS**

SYRACUSE, NY-- A scary diagnosis and a will to fight is what started it all. Such was the motivation behind founding Protect Our Breasts, a multidisciplinary organization focused on education about everyday toxins that cause breast cancer. What seemed like devastating news at first to Cynthia Barstow, founder of Protect Our Breasts, turned into an exciting final result, an organization that has since grown across campuses in the northeast. Much like Cynthia's personal story, the Syracuse chapter of Protect Our Breasts followed a similar path on its journey to where it is today.

Founded in 2014 by Ellie Prather, a then Syracuse student, the Syracuse chapter did not have an easy start. Now working in the orthopedics department of Boston Children's Hospital, Ellie still reflects on the struggle that she faced her senior year in making Protect Our Breasts a reality, and the great journey that eventually turned into. Cynthia and Ellie bare both from the same community in Amherst, Massachusetts, so when Cynthia approached Ellie about creating the a chapter at her alma mater, Ellie immediately agreed, thinking that starting a club would be easy, especially one about such an important topic. However, she soon found that many barriers stood in her way.

When asked about her memory of the early stages of the application process, Ellie recalled, "Making Protect Our Breasts a reality was incredibly difficult and far more challenging than I anticipated. It turns out the Student Association turns down a lot of potential clubs." After drafting a preliminary constitution and submitting it to the Student

Activities Board to become an approved student organization, she was initially denied. She couldn't believe that after all the time and effort she had poured into her application, it had still not been enough, and was at first discouraged. However, she remembers the pivotal moment in the process when she looked toward Cynthia as her role model and thought to herself, "She beat breast cancer and that takes infinitely more strength than starting a club." Ellie's admiration of Cynthia's drive is what inspired her to try again, and she stayed up all night writing an appeal. About a week later, Ellie learned that her appeal had been accepted, and Protect Our Breasts had become a reality. However, while the initial stages were solely due to Ellie's dedication, she attributes the club's overall success today to the girls who signed up within the first year. Ellie could not speak enough about these girls and gushed, "...over time, amazing, inspiring women joined and we all worked together to overcome the barriers preventing us from fully engaging with campus and the community."

As the organization grew within its first year, Ellie found that an important part of what made Protect Our Breasts so special was its ability to utilize so many skill sets from all different disciplines. Not only did this make meetings more insightful by bringing a whole array of ideas to the table, it created a close-knit, almost family, of girls, all from different backgrounds, but all dedicated to the same cause. In fact, while being interviewed, Ellie made it a particular point to explain that what she was most proud of was developing such a committed group of girls. Ellie said, "My proudest moment was honestly leaving Protect Our Breasts behind, as odd as that sounds. I wish I had more time to help the group flourish, but my proudest moment was graduating and leaving

because I was so incredibly confident in the women that remained and are there today to keep it going.” Because Protect Our Breasts was so interdisciplinary, there was no hierarchy within the group, and the organization was developed on the basis of mutual contribution and that everyone had a seat at the table. This contributed quite a deal to helping the organization flourish, as new members were immediately encouraged to take a leadership position within the group and have a say in its structure for the rest of its life on the Syracuse campus.

Kathleen Seibert, the group’s current financial representative, reflected on her first year in the group with much the same nostalgia as Ellie. A pre-med major and marketing minor, Kathleen remembered coming to the first meeting not knowing what to expect, but immediately being given the opportunity to take a leadership role. While the mission of Protect Our Breasts is not significant to her specific career path, she explained that, “The leadership and being a part of an executive group is definitely a critical skill and quality I will use in the future,” and she is so thankful that Protect Our Breasts has given her the opportunity to better herself in this way. Kathleen also has a personal story associated with breast cancer in that her mother was diagnosed with it as a child, another part of what sets Protect Our Breasts apart from other student organizations. Many of the other girls involved in the organization have lost someone to breast cancer, or have a family member or friend battling the disease right now, so they have personal motivation toward wanting the club to succeed. This added incentive is a huge part of the family feeling that both Ellie and Kathleen spoke about.

Today, the group is continuing to thrive, with an event planned for October and invitations extended to both Ellie and Cynthia to return to Syracuse for a visit. While the startup was difficult for Ellie, with the help of the other girls on the executive board, she said it made the process much more manageable. For other students thinking that they might like to start an organization on campus for a cause near and dear to their heart, Ellie encourages students is to just go for it! Her advice is to, “Give it your all, put your heart into it, and don’t give up. Don’t let the barriers discourage you, they will help you be stronger in the end,” something that is truly the case with her experience. However, she wanted to note that the most important thing is to get a great team of people behind you because they make it possible and can build you up when things get tough. Ellie explained that it was the people that made the experience what it was for her, which was absolutely amazing. She concluded her interview by saying, “The fact that I was able to start something that still has meaning is a wonderful feeling, but I owe it all to the girls who are there now, continuing to care about this topic.”

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