

# On road to recovery after health setbacks

By Hiroko Sato

hsato@lowellsun.com

LOWELL — Dorothy Joan Auger pushes herself up the staircase inside her home's front door, firmly planting one foot at a time.

She remembers being carried down these stairs into an ambulance less than nine months ago, when she suddenly lost sensation in her body from the waist down.

Blood tests revealed that a cholesterol medication she had taken attacked her body, weakening the muscles. It could be a year before she would walk again, her doctors warned. Auger knew she

Please see **RECOVERY/5** would work just as fiercely to train her muscles as she did to beat cancer and a heart attack over the previous two years.

Five weeks into rehab, Auger walked into her home with the help of a walker. She then learned how to walk upstairs without her husband or a nurse standing behind her. Some surgeons still say she may never walk like she used to.

"I'm going to prove them wrong," says Auger, who is eager to put an end to her three-year battle with a series of debilitating illnesses. "You have to have a will to get better. If you don't have the will, forget it."

Auger, a 66-year-old great-grandmother from Lowell's Belvidere neighborhood, is feeling upbeat as she rings in the new year.

Despite inoperable cancer of the breast and colon that forced her to retire from her

job at an insurance company three years ago, Auger believes 2008 is filled with nothing but promises that she will continue to beat the odds.

Her ordeal began in February 2004 when she began to lose her sense of taste and started feeling sluggish.

Food made her sick. She would eat half a sandwich a day.

A battery of tests showed no conclusive signs of illness. Then in August of that year, after months of frustrating trips to medical offices and 30 pounds of weight loss, a doctor called her to cancel her appointment for a biopsy of an abdominal mass. The test was unnecessary, he told her, because recent blood work detected cancerous cells.

The fight was on against ovarian cancer. Her new doctors at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute immediately scheduled her for a hysterectomy — only to find that they had to delay it for three months. During the pre-operation tests, they noticed she had just suffered a heart attack.

Auger had felt a hot flash while she was receiving the cancer diagnosis over the phone a few days earlier. It turns out it was a heart attack. She had two stints inserted into her arteries.

November came, and Auger finally underwent cancer surgery. The surgeons didn't remove any cancerous tumors, though, because they weren't there. Auger now had a new diagnosis: stage 4 breast cancer — the most advanced level.

It was inoperable, but she went on medications.

"I was very upset and bit-

ter" that the mammogram she had faithfully taken every year failed her. "Many times I cried to myself."

But that didn't last long. Her husband, Don, a retired data-processing specialist, began attending a prayer club every day, as he often did when his neighbor was battling cancer years earlier.

"It's going to get better,"

Don would tell her. "We just take a day at a time."

And Auger wanted to be around Don, their three children, 10 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren for many more years to come.

The medications kept her cancer under control, but the disease caused blood clots in her legs, making them swell to three times their normal size. After she had stints put into her legs, she seemed on her way to recovery.

"Life is too short to be miserable," she told herself, and she did all she could to stay healthy.

When her teenage grandchildren asked why she never stopped shopping for them, she would tell them that's what grandmothers do. "Grandmother spoils you," she'd tell them.

Then, in December of 2006, her doctor discovered a bleeding ulcer called *Helicobacter pylori*, requiring her to get three pints of blood in a transfusion.

The calendar turned to 2007, and Easter was just around the corner when Auger felt weakness in her legs. The symptoms worsened for the next few days, to the point where she could no longer get up from a chair or lift her legs. Don called 911.

While receiving intravenous therapy at New England Rehabilitation Hospital Satellite on Pawtucket Street in Lowell, Auger embarked on rehabilitation. She'd try to lift



her hips even if they wouldn't move an inch. She'd try to move her legs in bed at night. If another patient didn't go to a session, freeing up a therapist, she'd take it.

"Once she started seeing small gains, there was no stopping," says Elin Zgonis, Auger's physical therapist, who repeatedly told her she would walk again.

The more Auger trusted Zgonis, the more she believed in the rehabilitation. And a strong bond developed between the two, Zgonis says.

Auger credits her amazing recovery to the dedication of Zgonis and other therapists at the rehabilitation center. She still keeps in touch with them. And that friendship, as well as the help of Don — who took rehabilitation routines with Auger while taking care of all house chores — helped her get through the news this past May that the cancer had spread to her colon. A recent CT-scan showed that both the breast cancer and the colon cancer are under control.

"Family is my life," Auger

said. "I want to be able to enjoy my grandchildren. I just want to live."

The key to surviving devastating diagnoses is the "power of will and prayer," Auger says.

It's also about trying before giving up, she adds.

"I will walk normally soon," Auger says. "I don't know how soon, but I plan on it."



Dorothy Joan Auger is recovering from cancer, circulation problems, a bleeding ulcer, but she's confident 2008 will bring improvement. SUN/BOB WHITAKER



Lowell's Dorothy Joan Auger, with her husband, Don, talks about her recovery from various illnesses.

SUN/BOB WHITAKER