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The Teen Years:

Cute Boys, Text Messages, Hip Clothes, iPods and...Ovarian Cancer

Atlanta, GA (November 27, 2006) – Twenty-five years ago, having a phone in one's room was a big deal to a teenage girl. It was a huge accomplishment and maybe a significant battle won over the parents. And perhaps a manicure was allowed as long as it was paid for out of a girl's hard-earned babysitting money. The only things pierced back then were ears, cassette tapes had replaced 8-tracks and iPods hadn't even been dreamt of. A teen's biggest worry was what to wear on that big date and how to get rid of the pimple that decided to show up the day before. The 'C' word was mostly reserved for adults and certainly never a topic of conversation at the high school dance. My, how things change.

Fast-forward to 2006 and meet 16-year-old Atlanta resident, Meghan Sullivan. Meghan is a normal teenager, a student of North Gwinnett High School and an aspiring actress. In February, she was doing all the things a teenage girl does when she began noticing abdominal swelling, which at first was just attributed to bloating, something that can accompany a female's menstrual cycle. But Meghan paid attention, knew her body and decided to get checked, under the loving guidance of her parents. "I immediately went through a series of tests, and then x-rays and then finally an ultrasound," explained Meghan. The news was horrific: the ultrasound revealed a large tumor on Meghan's ovary.

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The Sullivans wasted no time and did their research to find the 'best of the best' in gynecologic oncology, and based on referrals, selected Benedict B. Benigno, M.D., founder and CEO of the Ovarian Cancer Institute in Atlanta and director of Southeastern Gynecologic Oncology. Dr. Benigno was selected because of his track record as a gynecologic oncologist and because of the work that he and partner, John McDonald, PhD, conduct at the Ovarian Cancer Institute (OCI) in their mission to find an early diagnostic detection tool for ovarian cancer. The Sullivans learned that the OCI is developing what will become the largest ovarian tissue and serum bank in the world and is dedicated to not only seeking an early diagnostic test, but also identifying the causes of the various forms of ovarian cancer and developing improved treatment modalities. They wanted the best ammunition possible to battle their precious daughter's cancer, and they found it.

In March 2006, surgery revealed that Meghan's tumor was cancerous and had also spread to her abdominal cavity. Her insides were a mess. After removal of one ovary and her appendix, Dr. Benigno determined that chemotherapy was in order. But before administering the chemo, Dr. Benigno consulted with members of the OCI Board regarding new findings, new treatment combinations and the best way to treat a 16-year-old wrought with a somewhat atypical kind of ovarian cancer. "Dr. Benigno found that I had what's called a 'germ cell tumor,' a genetic condition that affects the reproductive organs," explained Meghan. Her father had been plagued with and survived the same disease 15 years prior. Germ cell ovarian tumors are derived from the egg producing cells within the body of the ovary, occur primarily in children and teens and are rare by comparison to epithelial ovarian tumors. Knowing this helped dictate the path Dr. Benigno would take in treating Meghan's cancer.

And so a new, uncharted chapter in this teen's young life began. "I underwent 12 weeks of chemotherapy, and since I am young, I had the option to go to Scottish Rite Children's Hospital, but I decided to receive treatments at Northside because I couldn't stand to see all the sick kids," remembers Meghan. During her 12 weeks of chemotherapy, Meghan endured what no 16-year-old should ever have to experience. She had fever spikes that sent her to the hospital, she had to have a port inserted due to the difficulty in finding veins to 'stick,' she underwent a blood transfusion when her red blood count dropped and her blood production dropped and she had to have countless booster shots and blood tests during rounds of chemo.

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Although Meghan was reluctant to talk about her cancer with her schoolmates, she was able to share her experiences with Jasmine, a 14-year-old who was also undergoing treatment for ovarian cancer. And she developed a rapport with Dr. Benigno, too. "I think that Dr. Benigno cares quite a bit about his patients, and especially about me because of my young age. His daughter is 16, too, just like me," said Meghan.

After having laparoscopic surgery in July – to make sure that the chemo had done its job and that she was cancer-free – Meghan was given a clean bill of health. "I have to have CAT Scans and blood tests every month for a year, but I am feeling good and trying to rebuild myself physically by walking. And my appetite is perfectly normal now, too," says Meghan.

Cases like Meghan's are much more widespread in today's society, and it's key to educate women of all ages about risk factors and symptoms of this gynecologic cancer that takes the lives of more than 13,000 women in the U.S. each year. And funding is so critical to organizations like the Ovarian Cancer Institute, a non-profit that has the capability of studying more than 300 tumor samples a year, and is inching closer and closer to an early diagnostic test. "With adequate funding, the OCI has the potential to become an international referral center for anyone seeking information on 'the silent killer,'" according to Elizabeth King, Executive Director of the Ovarian Cancer Institute.

The teen years should be about school and boys and new adventures and the prom – not about ovarian cancer and chemotherapy and blood transfusions. Awareness is key and ovarian cancer knows no age limit. "All women need to know that there *are* warning signs, that there *are* risk factors and that ovarian cancer doesn't have to be deadly," says King. "The Ovarian Cancer Institute is on a mission to create awareness so that funding can become more readily available for continued research, and ultimately so that an early detection tool can be discovered and implemented," she added. "We are on a mission to bring this 'other' women's cancer into light much like crusaders for the treatment of breast cancer have done with their pink campaign. Our color is teal, and September is the month designated for ovarian cancer awareness," says King. "It's imperative that we create a buzz about ovarian cancer for the simple reason of saving lives," she added.

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For more information on the Ovarian Cancer Institute, to organize a fundraiser or to make a donation, please visit www.ovariancancerinstitute.org or call (404) 385-7015.

About the Ovarian Cancer Institute

The Ovarian Cancer Institute (OCI) was established in 1999 as a 501 (c) 3, not-for-profit organization dedicated to finding an early diagnostic test for ovarian cancer, understanding the molecular basis of ovarian cancer and the cause of chemotherapy resistance, leading to the development of more effective therapies for the disease. The Institute's mission is to develop innovative research leading to earlier detection and more effective treatment of the cancer; to provide educational opportunities for medical professionals; and to educate women with respect to the early symptoms of ovarian cancer and to empower them to seek appropriate care immediately. The OCI lab is located on the campus of the Georgia Institute of Technology in downtown Atlanta, GA. For more information, visit www.ovariancancerinstitute.org.

About Benedict B. Benigno, M.D.

Benedict B. Benigno, M.D. is considered by the medical community and his patients as a medical pioneer, leading the way in developing a simple test to detect ovarian cancer in its earliest stages. Dr. Benigno, a world-renowned gynecologic oncologist, specializing in ovarian cancer, heads the Southeastern Gynecologic Oncology Group and serves as CEO and founder of The Ovarian Cancer Institute - a unique and cutting-edge medical research institute headquartered at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, GA.

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