

Portland lesbian Krystal Ashling will participate in a three-day walkathon starting May 17 in Boston to raise money for breast cancer treatment. Never having had the disease herself, the 54-year-old social worker nonetheless feels compassion toward the women who have lived with and died from it.

Ashling has worked for Southwest Washington Medical Center for seven years and has seen her share of suffering. "Because of being involved in hospice," she says, "I'm really quite aware of the impact [breast cancer] tends to have."

Although Ashling has participated in other walks and marathons, the upcoming event will be her biggest yet. Organized by Pallotta TeamWorks, a for-profit company that raises money for myriad causes, the Avon Breast Cancer Three-Day Walk will require walking 20 miles a day with thousands of other people.

Ashling must raise \$1,900 by April 19 and is reaching her goal primarily by sending letters to friends and family requesting support. The money will help give women with undetected breast cancer the resources to find out early enough to survive.

Last year, Ashling saw the movie *Pay It Forward* and began asking herself what she could do to change the world. "I was thinking: 'What can I do that would be like that? What could I do that would be giving more than I could even imagine?'"

As she searched for an answer, she came across the Pallotta TeamWorks mission statement. "I read it and I just started crying," Ashling says. "I knew that I had found the thing that I needed to do." Ashling recently underwent knee surgery and suffers from arthritis, so the

SURVIVAL STORY

A tragic past inspires a bright future for Krystal Ashling

by Sarah Leimert

walk will be a serious commitment for her to take on.

Today, Ashling is living happily in Southeast Portland with her partner, Marlene. But her life has involved a great deal of personal struggle and misfortune. In fact, the horrific experience she endured 20 years ago might play a big part in her current commitment to compassionate civic duty.

When Ashling came out in 1976, she was living in Eugene and married with three children, Dimitri, Rebecca and Marina. When she and her husband split, the court denied her custody of the kids and granted it to their father.

Furthermore, it ordered that when she was visiting with her children, no other lesbians could be present. This ruling meant the relationship her kids had formed with her friends had to be severed immediately.

Just as Ashling was getting accustomed to this hostile legal environment, things got even worse. In 1980, her ex-husband disappeared without a trace, taking her children with him. She was unaware of her kids' whereabouts or status for eight years.

During that time, Ashling was plagued with nightmares, depression and anxiety that took over her life. Financial woes made it impossible for her to begin a nationwide search for her children.

She even changed her name—she needed

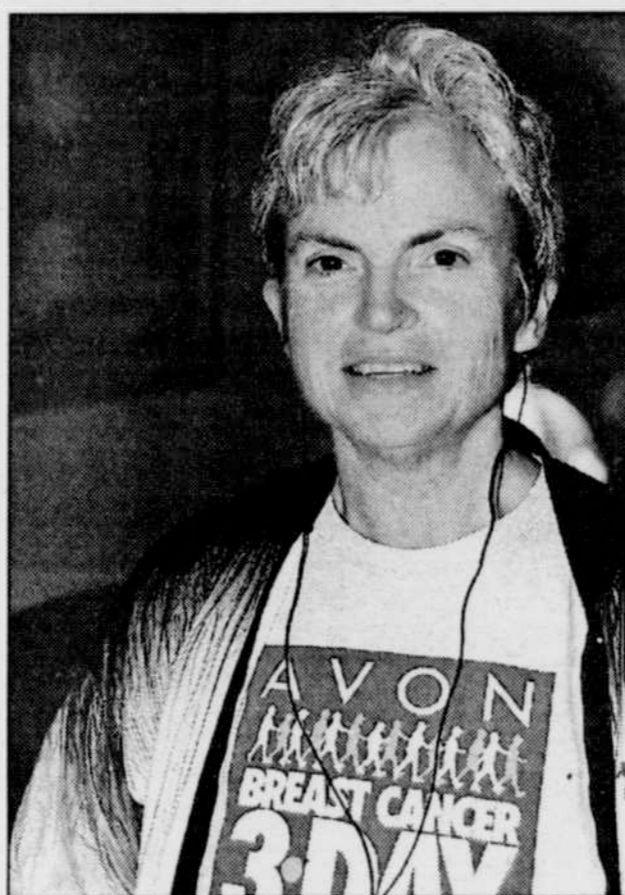


PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

Krystal Ashling's ex-husband and three children disappeared without a trace in 1980

something strong and solid to hold onto, as everything else she depended upon fell apart. She liked the connotations of "Krystal" and made the switch.

After a move to Salem, Ashling finally contacted a lawyer she saw advertised in a magazine. "I read that she said she knew how to find families," she says. "I just called her and [asked if she had] any ideas."

After Ashling mentioned her husband had been remarried and divorced again, the lawyer encouraged her to contact the second wife's family. "So I called the parents of his ex-wife, and they were only too glad to tell me where the kids were. That's how I ended up finding them."

Ashling is now in regular contact with her children. She is training Dimitri and Marina for walking the Portland Marathon. She is doing the Avon walk with her partner's daughter Lois, and Rebecca and Marina are arranging a benefit function for the event.

Rebecca and her partner recently had a child, so Ashling is now a grandmother as well. She couldn't be happier.

Ashling says the process of reacquainting herself with her children has been long and slow. "I think that it will probably take the rest of our lives to heal everything," she says. "But it's wonderful to have them in my life now—to be able to teach them the things that I've learned about physical fitness, about being healthy and about believing in yourself, being able to stick to something that you want. Knowing that underneath you are good and that you're valuable." □

To sponsor Ashling for the AVON BREAST CANCER THREE-DAY WALK, make a donation at www.bethepeople.com. She can be contacted at krystala@mac.com.

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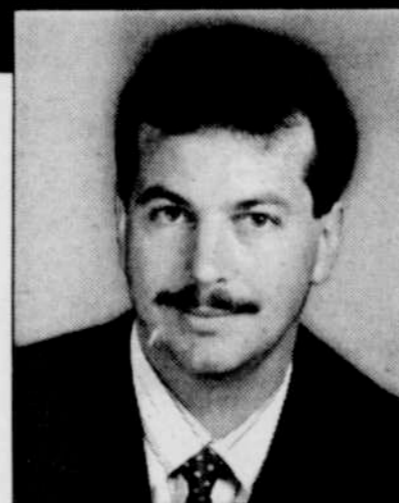
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