Deb Dorsey learned she had cancer after going in for a routine checkup last year. She became one of the first patients to take advantage of a multidisciplinary program at the recently opened Gillette Center for Women’s Cancers at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.
The realization of a dream

It was an exciting day in November when Susan F. Smith, chair of the National Advisory Council of the Women’s Cancer Program, and Alfred M. Zeien, chief executive officer and chairman of the board at The Gillette Company, cut the ribbon at the Gillette Center for Women’s Cancers and opened the door to a new way of treating women with cancer. Together, the pair represented the many, many people who came together to create this special place.

Sue envisioned a place that specializes in breast and gynecologic cancers, a place that would provide all aspects of patient care, from medical treatment to nutritional and psychological counseling. The Gillette Company provided crucial financial support for important breast and gynecologic cancer research.

The second Gillette Center opened at Massachusetts General Hospital in February. Together, these two centers are a model for unparalleled patient-focused care.

In addition to receiving excellent medical care, many patients and their families are taking advantage of other services at the center designed to meet their needs at a very stressful time in their lives. The Houghton Mifflin Patient and Family Resource Room gives patients and their families a wealth of information about treatment options, support groups and coping with cancer. At the Friends Boutique, patients can find wigs, hats, scarves, lingerie and non-metallic deodorant needed during radiation treatments. Trained staff members are on hand to fit prostheses.

The patient and family conference room in the Gillette Center is also a busy place these days. Center staff have organized a full schedule of seminars and support groups for patients and their families. A schedule can be found on page 11.

Our caregivers also are reaching out to the community. In January, for instance, more than 100 businesswomen gathered to hear cancer survivor Carol Bartz, chief executive officer of Autodesk, one of the largest software companies in the world, and Barbara Smith, M.D., Ph.D., co-director of the Gillette Center at Dana-Farber. Also in January, Ross Berkowitz, M.D., spoke to a standing-room-only crowd of more than 250 community physicians about the early detection and prevention of gynecological cancers. Beginning this spring, our physicians will be speaking to women in the workplace at a series of brown bag lunches.

It’s very exciting to be part of this new initiative in patient care and research. I’m proud of what Dana-Farber/Partners CancerCare has accomplished. We have made a wonderful beginning, but our work can’t stop here. I look forward to announcing new discoveries and improved therapies developed in our laboratories and clinics. I look forward with ever more optimism to the day when patients will come to us not only for hopeful treatments, but for a cure. I know you join me in this wish.

David G. Nathan, M.D.
President
Dana-Farber Cancer Institute
Deb Dorsey is a filmmaker who lives in the Boston area with her husband, Bob Burns, and their two children, Bobby, 8, and Georgia, 3. Deb Dorsey was diagnosed with breast cancer last fall.

"As I sat in the doctor's office waiting for the results of my mammogram, I was thinking that it was all a waste of time because they weren't going to find anything. But, they did – a small lump in my right breast. My heart sank. After an ultrasound, the radiologist said it didn't look like cancer, but my primary physician wanted me to see a breast surgeon as soon as possible.

A long day
Barbara Smith, M.D., Ph.D., co-director of the Gillette Centers for Women's Cancers performed a lumpectomy and removed the tumor along with surrounding tissue including lymph nodes to see if the tumor had spread. It hadn't, but Smith recommended that Dorsey follow up with chemotherapy and radiation to catch any stray cells of the tumor that might have escaped. In November, Dorsey became one of the first patients to participate in a multidisciplinary care program that brings several specialists together at the Gillette Center. In one trip to Dana-Farber, Dorsey met with all the physicians who would be treating her. It was a long day, but a comforting one.

After Dorsey had registered, a nurse escorted her and her husband, and good friend Terry Rockefeller, into an examination room. "That first afternoon walking into Dana-Farber I was so scared - I was scared of chemotherapy, and I was scared of what I imagined I was going to see. I thought I would see..."
Deb Dorsey sits in a waiting room designed for comfort near the front lobby of the Gillette Center. Coffee and tea are available nearby.

Dr. Smith came in and set the stage for the rest of the visit – first I would see my oncology team, followed by the radiation oncology team. Dr. Smith explained that she and those teams had already met to discuss my case and work on a treatment plan.

Dr. Hal Burstein, an oncology fellow, came after Dr. Smith. He spent a long time going over the different options for chemotherapy. Next, Dr. Eric Winer, head of breast oncology, joined us. Both doctors encouraged me to choose the more aggressive approach that would take less time but potentially had stronger side effects, including hair loss. Dr. Burstein gave me handouts explaining all of the possible side effects, assuring me that I would not experience all of them.

Next came the radiation team: Dr. Jay Harris, head of radiology; Dr. May Tao, fellow radiologist, and Barbara Kalinowski, radiology nurse.

Dr. Harris immediately put me at ease. He assured me that I would do wonderfully through radiation treatment. Dr. Tao explained each and every step of radiation. She also told me that the most likely side effects would be the appearance of a little sunburn and some fatigue.
By the time we left, it was dark outside. Even though it had been a long, five-hour session, I felt confident that there was a solid plan in place. Now, I just had to get through it.

Coping with chemotherapy

In December, Dorsey started chemotherapy, something she once regarded as poison. “People often tell me that I have a good attitude toward my treatment, but it wasn’t that way in the days before my first chemotherapy treatment. I had one anxiety attack after another. I was so scared. I knew that if I didn’t do something to control this and put it in perspective, the fear was going to do a job on my body. I knew I needed all my resources available to get me through chemotherapy.

The biggest hurdle I had to overcome was changing my attitude toward chemotherapy – to begin thinking of it as a very powerful medicine that would rid my body of something that could potentially kill me. I turned to guided imagery to get a hold of my emotions and use my internal resources to work with the chemotherapy. My whole body and mind were working together to fight the cancer.

By my first day of chemotherapy, I was ready and quite amazed at how calm I was.

Dr. Burstein took the bottles of anti-nausea medication and lined them up, one after another. He then very concisely and clearly told me how to take them – if one didn’t seem to be working, take the next and the next – until I didn’t feel nauseous. This proved to be a very valuable lesson.

Waiting for the side effects to hit was very difficult. To my amazement, I never really got sick.

Radiation treatments

Dorsey began radiation in early March. She had 33 treatments in all.

“After going through chemo, radiation was a completely different experience. The chemo went after cells throughout the body; radiation went after them on a local basis. Between the third and fourth chemo treatments, I met again with Dr. Jay Harris, who used a sophisticated computer system to map the area that was to be radiated.

On my first day of radiation, I was feeling a little nervous, walking again into unknown territory. I was greeted by Barbara Kalinowski, who gave me a big welcoming hug. She showed me the routine and introduced me to the technicians – Jim, Cheri, Kathy, Monique, Kim and “Big Ed.” They checked and rechecked measurements to make sure they radiated only the section Dr. Harris had mapped out.

One of the fears of radiation is that your skin will burn. So, every Tuesday like clockwork, Dr. Harris checked my skin to make sure that I was doing well. Thankfully, the radiation caused no serious side effects.”

Looking ahead

Dorsey’s cancer appears to be in complete remission. Because her original tumor was estrogen positive, for the next five years she will be taking the drug tamoxifen, a hormone treatment. Her hair has started to grow back. Like other women who have survived cancer, she will visit her oncologist annually and continue to watch diligently for any signs that the cancer might have recurred.

“Getting diagnosed with breast cancer changed my life. It forced me to look at my own mortality. It was a slap in the face to wake up and re-evaluate my life. I feel like I’ve been given a second chance. You know, recurrence is on the mind of each and every woman who has had to face breast cancer. My way of facing this very real threat is to take to heart the words of my very dear husband, Bob, who once told me that each and every day is a gift – cherish it.”

That first afternoon walking into Dana-Farber I was so scared — I was scared of chemotherapy and I was scared of what I imagined I was going to see. I thought I would see great suffering, but what I saw was a lot of warmth and compassion.” – Deb Dorsey