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## Cancer survivor helps uninsured women get breast reconstruction surgery

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JIM REED/STAFF

Former Las Vegas showgirl Alisa Savoretti, is a breast cancer survivor, and founder of the nonprofit Hope Chest.

By MARY SHEDDEN | The Tampa Tribune  
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Alisa Savoretti was 4 when her mom signed her up for her first dance class.

A half hour of tap. A half hour of ballet. Every week she would watch herself dance in front of the mirror.

Each year after recitals, her mom, Betty Savoretti, would ask, "You want to keep dancing?"

And the Madeira Beach girl, who loved fishing and softball with an equal passion, always had the same answer: "Yes." Alisa Savoetti knew she was meant to dance.

Her passion evolved from an after-school activity to a college major. By the age of 20, Savoretti knew she could make a living on the stage. She toured the world, traveling from Yugolsavia to Guam to Las Vegas.

Being a showgirl on the Vegas Strip was "the greatest job in the world" for the young dancer. She was in amazing shape, working out six days a week and performing two shows a night in those legendary dazzling feather-boia costumes and headdresses.

"Dancers are athletes and I was a lean, mean fighting machine," she says.

But dancing at that pace is hard to maintain, and Savoretti took a break about a decade ago to create her own startup Internet business. She moved back in with her mom, and was feverishly developing her website when, in late 2001, she found a distinct lump in her right breast.

She was 38, without health insurance and too busy to get a mammogram.

"It was still, honestly, a month or two later when I went," says Savoretti, now 48. "And I went to the health department because that's what the uninsured (person) does."



For the next year, Savoretti focused on nothing but survival. She applied for Medicaid and was denied. But she found Pinellas County Social Services, which covered her mastectomy and eight rounds of chemotherapy.

"That basically saved my life," she says.

Grateful is the word Savoretti uses to describe the feeling she had the year after her mastectomy. But before long she grew disgusted.

"You develop a certain level of vanity as a dancer," she says. "By default, you look at yourself. You scrutinize yourself every day in the mirror."

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She hated that breast reconstruction surgery, the final step of treatment for women who have health, was out of reach. The federal Women's Health and Cancer Rights Act of 1998 mandates that insurance pay for breast reconstruction as a part of treatment.

Like many of the 6,200 uninsured women who lose a breast or breasts each year, she was left feeling incomplete.

"It's horrific," she says. "They come out of this horrific cancer journey ... and then they are stuck."

One long-term study of breast cancer survivors who underwent breast reconstruction found they had a better body image, self-esteem and sexual functioning than patients who did not have reconstruction. The Michigan Breast Reconstruction Outcome Study found that treatment improved mental health, emotional well-being, energy and ability to perform normal daily activities.

Savoretti had no right breast when she returned to dancing at Las Vegas' Riviera Hotel in 2003. She was happy to be alive and dancing. But she still was uncomfortable in her padded showgirl costume.

"The audience didn't know. But I knew, the girls in my dressing room knew," Savorietti says. "I was (self) conscious in the finale costume when I turned sideways."

Finally, Savorietti was able to undergo breast reconstruction surgery in 2005, under the hotel's health plan. But her three-year struggle to reach that point eventually led her to abandon dancing and to work fulltime creating a nonprofit organization to help uninsured women.

My Hope Chest looks at breast reconstruction as a part of breast cancer treatment. It is not a "boob job," Savoretti says of the procedure, which can cost \$25,000.

"The uninsured woman, if they are missing one or both breasts, if they are anything like me, at a certain point, they don't feel that lucky," she says.

With support from her mother, Savoretti has been able to recruit a handful of plastic surgeons across the country to donate their services to My Hope Chest, including her surgeon from Las Vegas. St. Petersburg surgeon Antonio Gayoso agreed when Savoretti approached him after he gave a local lecture.

"It's perceived that other organizations take care of this," says Savoretti, whose group was a nonprofit finalist in the Tampa Bay Business Journal's Businesswoman of the Year in 2011.

So far, five uninsured women have received breast reconstruction; five or six more surgeries are planned in the coming year. But in the last few years, My Hope Chest's waiting list has grown to about 200 women. Another four to six are referred from national breast cancer organizations each week.

Savoretti says the letters she receives are heartbreaking. Women talk about losing their confidence, jobs, husbands and boyfriends. One applicant, Laurie, had her breasts removed in 2009, four years after having a hysterectomy.

"I feel that everything that made me a woman physically has been taken from me. I have been in such a state of depression as the result of all of this that I find myself not wanting to leave my house," Laurie wrote. "I feel like people are staring at me and are making fun of me because I don't have any breasts."

Not every woman who receives a mastectomy wants breast reconstruction, Savoretti says. But she understands how those who want the treatment and cannot afford it feel.

"I was a young, single woman without my breast for three years," she says. "... It's only because I got a job that I got the surgery.

"I was that woman."