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BARBARA HAMMONTREE BENNETT | THE POWER OF WOMEN

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👁️ 41

Having twice beaten back cancer, Barbara Hammontree Bennett figures her time now is for her family, her community and herself. "I had Hodgkin's (disease) 20 years ago," Bennett recalled. "Then last year, I was diagnosed with breast cancer."

Her treatments took her hair, she recalled, so when it was time to observe Halloween traditions, she posted images and videos of herself in various costumes, showing herself as an assortment of bald-headed characters. Dr. Evil. Mr. Clean. Uncle Fester. Elmer Fudd. One of the Blue Man Group.

"I can laugh at it," said Bennett. "Everybody in life has been touched by cancer. So, I just rolled with it."

For 26 years, Bennett, a civil engineer and a surveyor with a degree from the University of Notre Dame, worked in the family engineering and consulting company, Hammontree & Associates. Her husband, Keith Bennett, also worked for the engineering firm for 23 years.

"When he got called to serve as county engineer, it just seemed like it was time to step away from the family business," said Bennett. "I needed to focus on my family more."

Following her career change in 2014, 53-year-old Bennett became director of administrative services with Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District where she is a member of the executive management team.

"I understand their mission of flood reduction," she said. "I could bring a private business outlook to a government organization and help promote the good work that the organization does."

In making the transition, Bennett left engineering behind. Her bio notes that while doing private engineering consulting, she worked with teams on a wide range of projects, including residential subdivisions, public parks, commercial complexes, industrial parks, road improvements and rail projects.

"It's funny, I'm not even doing engineering anymore. I'm in charge of public information. My main contribution is to help the operation promote our mission, enhancing communication and teamwork within our organization and our partners," she explained. "Every day, I learn something new. I enjoy working with the public and our team."

"If somebody has a good experience in an encounter with me, I feel I've done my job."

Muskingum Watershed is two years into a five-year, capital improvement project to upgrade the district's parks and campgrounds.

"Barb is a very strong woman who has accomplished so much in her life. And she has done so much for the organization," said John Hoopingartner, executive director/secretary of Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District. "She has been able to step in and help us with a variety of tasks. She helped us keep focused on our mission, she has assisted with strategic planning, and she has been instrumental in developing our core values."

"She is so plugged into the community in Stark County. We're so proud of her civic involvement and service."

Bennett's abundant work in the community is one of the factors in her selection as a Women's Impact Award recipient, which she said has left her "humbled and honored."

"I've always been wired to volunteer and give back to the community," she said. "I get the satisfaction of knowing the community is going to be stronger for my children."

The current chairperson of the Aultman Health Foundation in the past has chaired the Canton Regional Chamber of Commerce and Pro Football Hall of Fame Enshrinement Festival, has served on the executive team of the Ohio Building Industry Association, and among much other community service, is a board member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Stark Economic Development Board, the Ohio & Erie Canalway Corridor, the Stream and Wetlands Foundation, the Stark Education Partnership and Walsh University Advisory Board.

"An irony is that when I was diagnosed with cancer the second time, I was chair of the Aultman Health Foundation. I was like a secret shopper going through the treatments. And I'm cancer free. Their (the Foundation's) mission statement is 'leading our community to better health,' and that's where they led me."

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Gary Brown has written articles and columns for About periodically since the publication's inception, including pieces on books, recreational sports and historical subjects. A columnist and staff writer for The Repository, Brown enjoys such outdoor pursuits as golfing, sailing, skiing, biking and hiking. An avid student of the arts, he also uses those activities to inspire watercolor paintings.

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