Dorothy Devaughn struggled a little more than usual on Tuesday morning, but still considered it a good day.

“I’m here, so it’s a good day,” she said still smiling.

Devaughn is a breast cancer survivor, and has “a host of health problems” but she doesn’t let it get her down. That’s why when she saw that Tuesday’s gardening class was at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, she was determined to make it.

“I said ‘Devil, you’re not winning this,’ and I came to class,” she said.

https://www.birminghamtimes.com/2017/06/forge-breast-cancer-survivor-center-provides-support-every-stage-every-day/
Dorothy Devaughn has been a breast cancer survivor since 2013. (Ariel Worthy/ The Birmingham Times)

The Forge Breast Cancer Survivor Center offers monthly gardening classes to survivors and co-survivors – caregivers, loved ones, healthcare professionals. Devaughn has attended the monthly meetings since they began May 6.

Devaughn put it this way: “I don’t complain, I just explain,” she said. “I have more good days than I have bad days; if they’re not so good I’m not going to claim them as bad days.”

Forge, located in St. Vincent’s East, provides services, resources and support to survivors.

“We define survivors as anyone who has ever been diagnosed with breast cancer,” said Caroline McClain, manager at Forge. “That can be someone who has been recently diagnosed, or they are in treatment or they may have completed treatment 30 years ago.”

Each month the gardening class has a different focus. In May, the focus was herbs and its nutritional benefit. This month, the focus was vegetable gardening.

The goal is to “tie survivorship and health to something related to gardening,” McClain said. “There’s a lot of research that’s been done about the benefits of gardening. It’s great for your health; you’re outside, you’re getting exercise, you’re socializing, you’re growing something that you can eat, such as vegetables and herbs. Doing activities like that have great health benefits.”

A participant does not have to be an expert in gardening to participate, McClain said.
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Linda Brady, 62, said the class has encouraged her to go outside.

“It’s been a lot of fun, but I’ve learned a lot. I have a lot of things growing in my garden now,” she said. “I have something to take care of now. I’m pretty active, but it’s fun to see what I’ve done.”

Being with Forge gives her something to look forward to, said Brady, who is an 15-month survivor. The classes keep the mind busy, she said.

“It gets you up and doing things . . . you’re watching something grow,” she said.

Devauhn, who heard about Forge through another client, said she participates in the monthly gardening classes for the same reasons.

“It is such a good thing because it takes your mind off yourself,” said Devauhn, who has been a survivor since 2013. “I live alone, so I have a lot of time to think. This is really therapeutic. I’ve learned so much, as old as I am about what I can eat that’s healthy for me.”

Being able to fellowship with other survivors provides support, said Devauhn, 75, who was never into gardening, but after learning of alternative ways to plant – using a wheel barrel so she does not have to bend over as much – she decided to find out more. The classes provide more than just physical health benefits, she said.

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“In order to be positive you have to be around positive people,” she said. “Positivity will not allow negativity in your life. Even though we will have bad days, our positive side will definitely outweigh any negativity. And as survivors we need that.”

Joining a support group was important for Kenya Marsh, who was diagnosed April 11.

“I was going through a rough day, and was on Facebook looking up support groups. I found Forge and called, and talked to them for several hours,” Marsh said. “It was reassuring and affirming to help me get through it.”

Marsh, 43, who is a clinical therapist, said, “You see people of all ages, cultural backgrounds, races as survivors and it’s encouraging. It gives me hope that I can survive.”

Marsh, who has an 18-month old daughter, added, “I’m thinking about my family and support system. I want to incorporate what I learned in gardening with her, and display healthier habits for my daughter.

Forge, operating since January 2016, is a partnership between all Birmingham hospital systems: University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), Grandview, St. Vincent’s, Brookwood, as well as their affiliates. The nonprofit serves Birmingham and its five surrounding counties: Jefferson, Walker, St. Clair, Shelby and Blount.

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“If a survivor lives farther out from those counties we will still help,” McClain said. “We’ve had people from Florida, who come to UAB for treatment who use our services.”

Forge partners with Oasis Counseling where clients receive free counseling, Gateway Financial for budgeting and alternative ways to pay for necessities, the Birmingham Bar and Volunteer Lawyers Program to help clients create wills, and any other legal concerns, and also provides transportation to and from treatments.

The Forge partnership has brought each hospital under an umbrella that serves the entire region.

“It’s great seeing all of these competing hospitals come together for a greater cause, and that’s to ensure that breast cancer survivors have all that they need,” McClain said.

To get more information on programs and upcoming events, visit ForgeOn.org.