

DECEMBER 2021

East End Living

BROWNSBORO ROAD

An exclusive magazine serving the residents of the Brownsboro Road Corridor

2021 Person of the Year

Barbie Tafel

Better than Ever



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Cover image by Leslie Mosher



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“ Life experiences are building blocks for the next chapter. ”

By Kelly Jarboe | Professional photography by Leslie Mosher

Barbie Tafel will be the first person to tell you that life is unpredictable. She will also be the first person to tell you that there is always a silver lining. She has experienced her share of ups and downs throughout life, but Barbie is thriving today. She is an Exterior Designer and Realtor, a mother, a grandmother, a daughter, a sister, a friend, a colleague and more.

In her early career, Barbie was first a tennis instructor and then the coordinator for the Louisville International Tennis Classic. Once her children started school, she embraced her love of the outdoors and pursued a career as a landscape designer, entering into partnership with Mary Webb.

After Mary retired, Barbie expanded her services to include not only designing landscapes but coordinating the installations of every facet of exterior projects. Barbie explains, “I realized that the bushes and trees are the ‘icing on the cake’. Having control of a project from start to finish prevents costly mistakes and allows me to create beautiful and functional outdoor rooms.”

Barbie faced a life-changing event when she was diagnosed with stage two breast cancer in summer 2009. Over the next 18 months, Barbie underwent six surgeries, six rounds of chemotherapy and one month of radiation. She had a double mastectomy and multiple other surgeries. She planned both her son’s and her daughter’s weddings that same year and had a son deploy to Bahrain.

Barbie confesses it was “a roller coaster of emotions.”

Barbie explains that her breast cancer diagnosis changed her outlook on life. Previously, she never wanted to ask anyone for help, maintaining an illusion of control, but breast cancer changed that. She had no choice but to rely on others, and she marvels at the incredible love and support she felt. Barbie admits, “When you allow people into your life, your relationships become a lot deeper.”

In 2010, Angela Tafel (Barbie’s sister-in-law) asked Barbie to share her story at Norton Healthcare’s Derby Divas event (for more information on Derby Divas, check out page 8). Barbie agreed because she wanted to share her story and help others.

Barbie credits preparing her speech for that event as a cathartic moment. She says she really took the time to reflect on her journey and feel so many things she had held inside. Barbie says, “It was a powerful awakening for me to not only acknowledge what all had happened but to be able to share it and how my life had changed...for the better.”

Barbie has learned that some things in life are simply beyond control. She says, “The word surrender to me was a spiritual awakening that happened as a result of my breast cancer journey.” Prior to her diagnosis, she admits to working hard to maintain control or at least the illusion of control. However, her health battle made her realize there was only so much she could do, and she was forced to surrender, which she describes as “freeing”.

Barbie’s reflection led to an “ah-ha” career moment as well. She was helping one of her landscape clients prepare her house to list for sale. Her client commented how she wished Barbie could sell her house. She talked about trusting Barbie and admiring her work ethic and how she had put her heart and soul into the property. Barbie says that she enrolled in real estate school the very next day and got her license one month later. She joined Kentucky Select Properties, and that client’s home overlooking the river was her first sale.

Through her many ups and downs, Barbie knew she would eventually “pick up the pieces and create a new and different tapestry.” She explains, “I am a completely different person than I was. I value the experience. I wouldn’t wish it on anybody, but there were so many blessings that came as a result of it.”

Today, Barbie declares she has no time for negativity in her life. She cherishes each and every day and insists she “will never take a sunset or a sunrise for granted.” She recognizes that her body and her hair have changed (and “not for the better”, according to her), but it’s what is inside that truly matters.



Barbie loves her work and considers it a passion as well as a profession. She enjoys spending time with her 93-year-old mother, her three adult children, her five grandchildren and her large family. Her hobbies include gardening, tennis, pickleball, oil painting, snow skiing, boating and spending time outdoors. She is very active in the community and is or has been involved with Glenview Garden Club, Locust Grove, Olmsted Conservancy, Riverwood Architectural Review, Norton Healthcare, Derby Divas and more.

Barbie has lived in Riverwood for 37 years. Barbie says she loves the "convenient location, well-built homes with mature trees, the location of historic Locust Grove across the street providing wooded trails to hike, and the park-like setting." Barbie is joined in Riverwood by two brothers, one cousin, and her daughter, son-in-law and three grandchildren. The rest of her extended family lives within a two-mile radius.

Barbie has battled through several life-changing events. She is proud and thankful to have come out of them stronger than ever before. She explains, "As a result of my breast cancer, I gained a newfound sense of peace and surrender, comfort in sharing

my vulnerability and defects, a willingness to embrace imperfection and accept help, and a feeling of serenity."

Barbie goes on to say, "As a landscape designer, I am always making comparisons between nature and humans. There is an incredible parallel between trees and people. Some are strong, some are weak. A tree is stimulated when the wind blows, bending its branches. A tree is challenged by the adversity of the seasons and forces of nature, but can survive if grounded. The branches either break or become stronger as a result of being challenged. I relate to the tree."



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