How nice, was Amanda Darling’s initial reaction when she received the call from her surgeon. A personal call.

Darling now laughs at the recollection. “That’s actually what I thought,” she says. The registered nurse on Ellison 7 recalls how – after working the night shift in May 2013 – she awoke to a voicemail requesting she return the call regarding the results of a core biopsy on a suspicious lump in her breast. “But the doctor said, ‘Amanda, I have your results and it’s not good. You have breast cancer.’”

She was 27 years old.

It had already been a whirlwind of a year. Darling had just started at the MGH on the Surgical Trauma Unit in January – just days later, her mother was diagnosed with endometrial cancer. “It was a difficult time, but everyone on the unit was just so nice. They didn’t even know me, but they were so supportive and worked with me so I could have a flexible schedule to go with my mom during her treatments,” Darling says. “And then a few months later, I had to tell them I had cancer.”

The ensuing seven months were marked by a medical leave filled with chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation to treat the invasive ductal carcinoma. But, Darling says, her days also were full of an enormous amount of support, generosity and kindness from her colleagues who showered her with cards, calls and prayers. Darling also found a welcome distraction before and after hospital visits in baking cupcakes. “Baking was really a blessing,” she says. “It kept me busy, which was perfect. Every time I had treatment, I brought a batch with me to share with staff and patients. I was known as the ‘cupcake girl.’”

When Darling’s Ellison 7 colleagues heard about – and tasted – her passion for baking, they pooled together funds and purchased a KitchenAid Stand Mixer. It was a top-of-the-line model, Darling says. “And it’s pink, of course. They just dropped it off on my doorstep with (Continued on page 4)

A positive partnership

When Cindy Candamil was ready to give birth to her second child at the MGH, she became one of the first patients to benefit from a budding partnership between the midwives of the MGH Vincent Obstetrics and Gynecology Department and Birthing Gently. The Boston-based organization of doulas – nonmedical labor coaches – offers physical and emotional support before, during and after childbirth. The MGH Midwifery Service now offers free doula support to some of its patients through the new volunteer doula program.

“I had a doula when I gave birth to my eldest daughter,” Candamil says. “I couldn’t imagine giving birth without a doula in the delivery room – I was so grateful I could have one at the MGH.”

Midwives have been a vital component of the Vincent Obstetrics and Gynecology Department since its establishment at the MGH in 1994. They (Continued on page 2)
embody a compassionate and family-friendly practice that complements the values of MGH midwives, says Autumn Cohen, a certified nurse midwife at the hospital. “I knew having this type of program would benefit a lot of our patients here. When I was updating the list of doulas in the Boston area, I asked if they offered free or reduced services.”

Tara Poulin, a certified doula and founder of Birthing Gently, offered her already-established volunteer program, which coordinates doula services for hospitals in Massachusetts, southern New Hampshire and New York City. “We have nearly 45 birth doulas in the volunteer program. Some of our volunteer doulas are working toward certification; others have been volunteering their services since I started the program 12 years ago.”

Volunteer doula services at the MGH typically include one prenatal visit, 24/7 prenatal phone support, attendance at the birth and two hours postpartum, and one follow-up phone call. For Candamil, her experience was a little different. “I met my doula for the first time in the delivery room – I was induced two weeks before my due date – but it felt like I knew her forever. She was very sweet and had a calming presence. She massaged me, guided me through the breathing exercises and helped me cope with the pain.”

Cohen says numerous studies have documented that with the support of a doula, women are less likely to have pain relief medications administered, less likely to have a cesarean birth, and report having a more positive childbirth experience. While the statistics are favorable, Cohen adds that it is not all about the numbers. “This is about providing support for women during a life-changing and physically overwhelming time,” she says. “We are in the delivery room as much as possible, but there are women who need more. Having that extra person completely dedicated to them really improves the outcome of birth and can make a big difference.”

The volunteer doula program gives priority to women who are in the most need, such as those who lack support or who have special health risks. Midwives identify patients who would benefit from a volunteer doula and coordinate efforts with Birthing Gently.

For more information about the volunteer doula program, contact Cohen at ocohen0@partners.org.

Caring for chronic wounds

WITH RISING LIFE EXPECTANCY in the U.S. and the increasing prevalence of chronic medical conditions, the need for advanced treatment of chronic wounds also is on the rise. Most wounds heal normally over time; however, chronic or slow-healing wounds may require a dedicated approach to help them fully heal.

As a result of this growing patient population, the MGH has expanded its Wound Care Program, which promotes the rapid healing of wounds using skin debridement, advanced topical therapies and dressings, and surgical treatments. The program – organized within the MGH Vascular Center – is led by Michael Watkins, MD, who will serve as its medical director; Virginia Capasso, RN, PhD, advanced practice nurse; and Keith Marple, administrative director.

“The need to better coordinate the expertise of many specialists to care for these complicated patients made this a sound investment for the institution,” says Ann Prestipino, senior vice president of Surgical and Anesthesia Services and Clinical Business Development.

The expanded program now includes wound care in Waltham as well as a new coordinated phone line and electronic referral form to manage patients regardless of the underlying condition. Staff can refer patients with non-healing wounds to the program using the “Wound Care Program” form in CRMS, or at the 6-HEAL referral line (617-726-4325). Given the many different clinical specialties that take part in the care of wounds, a referral coordinator will ensure the right specialists are involved in each patient’s care.

“Chronic wounds can be incredibly painful and debilitating, but with the expert collaboration of many teams around the hospital, we can create a comprehensive solution to heal these wounds,” says Michael R. Jaff, DO, medical director of the Vascular Center.

For more information, email Marple at kmarple@partners.org.
A dose of happiness

HAPPY — that is how Maida Chaguan now sees her older sister. But just a few years ago she would have described her quite differently. “Alix lost all of her energy, she barely communicated with us and appeared moody all the time,” says Maida Chaguan.

Alix Chaguan, 34, is one of many adults with Down syndrome who also was born with debilitating heart disease. Her health began to decline nearly 11 years ago. “She would wake up in the middle of the night gasping for air,” Maida Chaguan says. “When I held her hands, I noticed her fingers were purple.”

Alix Chaguan was born with complete atrioventricular septal defect, which is a hole in the wall dividing the heart’s upper chambers. Septal defects are common in children with Down syndrome but do not always lead to severe cardiac disease. However, Alix Chaguan’s case was severe due to a late diagnosis. “By the time we met Alix, the heart disease had already affected her lungs,” says Ami Bhatt, MD, medical director of the Adult Congenital Heart Disease Program in the MGH Institute for Heart, Vascular and Stroke Care. “Because she wasn’t diagnosed as a child, she was unable to undergo surgeries that may have prevented her from declining as she got older. MGH cardiologists work closely with patients like Alix Chaguan to manage congenital heart conditions so they can live full, healthy lives.”

Taking appropriate precautions and respecting the risks involved treating patients with Down syndrome, Bhatt prescribed a daily medication to decrease the blood pressure in the lungs and help Alix Chaguan breathe easier. “It was nice not to have to do something invasive,” Bhatt says. “This was a person who was not feeling well enough to be the person she wanted to be. Alix’s story is reflective of many young adults with chronic disease. Over years, patients get used to what they think their lives are supposed to be. It’s our job to challenge them and say, ‘Do you really feel the best you can?’”

Although Alix Chaguan has limited communication abilities, Maida Chaguan says she can see the change in her sister. “She danced for the first time in years. I know she is happy now. As a sister, it’s one of those things you just know.”

For more information, visit http://massgeneral.org/adultcongenitalheart.

Happy New Year!

ON FEB. 8, the MGH Chinese Scientists and Staff Association hosted its annual Lunar New Year’s Day Party to welcome the Year of The Horse. Some 200 attendees celebrated with food, camaraderie and entertainment.

Master of Ceremony Jason Yan introduced more than 50 performers throughout the evening. Traditional Chinese dances were offered by the Cambridge Center for Chinese Culture Dance Group, the Winchester School of Chinese Culture and Hayley Ye.

Musical selections were performed by professional violinists Quan Yuan and Ni-Chun Shih, and ShuXi Wang, a research fellow from the MGH, who played the Guzheng, a traditional Chinese stringed instrument. In addition, Eastern Star Children’s Choirs and Minghua L. Chen presented several songs during the event.
A model mentor

ISAAC SCHIFF, MD, chief of MGH Vincent Obstetrics and Gynecology Department, was presented with the 2013 John T. Potts Jr., MD, Faculty Mentoring Award during a Feb. 12 celebration in the Trustees Room. Given annually by the Center for Faculty Development, the award honors senior faculty members who have demonstrated excellence in helping junior faculty and trainees succeed for 10 years or more. Potts – the award’s namesake and first recipient – served as chairman of the Department of Medicine and physician-in-chief from 1981 to 1996 and as director of Research from 1995 to 2004. “John Potts was on the search committee that brought me to the MGH more than 25 years ago,” said Schiff. “When I needed support he gave it to me willingly. His advice was thoughtful, compassionate, fair and always useful; he made it look effortless. It is an honor and humbling to receive this award. It means a great deal and I am touched by all the people who are here today.”

— Sweet support (Continued from page 1)

a beautiful card. I burst into tears. Being a nurse, I didn’t freak out when I received my diagnosis. But when that box showed up – that’s when I became overcome with emotion. I can’t say enough about that floor. They are the greatest crew in the world. ”

Later that day, Darling logged on to see how much earned time she had left in her account, knowing her balance was nearly depleted. To her surprise, there were 500 hours of earned time – donated by members of the nursing staff. “It was the same day I received the KitchenAid Mixer, so you can imagine I was an absolute wreck and just completely overwhelmed.”

Darling says hours continued to be deposited into her account throughout the duration of treatment, allowing her to be paid for the entirety of her medical leave. “It was just so humbling,” she says. But the support didn’t stop there. Strength and motivation also came in a variety of other ways from her colleagues. “This floor, these nurses, they literally feel like family to me. They supported me in so many different ways. Nurses, they don’t ask you how you’re feeling – they just know.”

The Ellison 7 team is quick to repay the compliments. “Amanda is one of our own,” says Vilma Pacheco, RN. “I think she believes she was the lucky one, but we were the lucky and blessed ones to have watched Amanda fight cancer with such grace, love, kindness and dignity. It was amazing watching her survive.”

Darling says she will carry some of the lessons she’s learned during her battle into her daily work life. “I think having gone through cancer will make me a more empathetic nurse because I know what it’s like to be a patient. And it also might make me a little tougher. I can tell patients, ‘I know what it feels like. But if I can do it, you can do it too.’”

With her cancer treatments behind her, Darling returned to work on Ellison 7 on Feb. 1. She came armed with containers of pink-frosted cupcakes, and her colleagues met her with open arms – welcoming her back, all wearing pink scrubs in her honor.

“ This whole experience officially made me an Ellison 7 nurse for life,” Darling says.