When Debbie Santangelo’s husband Eric was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer at the age of 42 it came as a shock to everyone, including their three young children. Eric was healthy up until his diagnosis, when he had a blemish removed from his face that came back as cancerous. Three months later, Eric passed from his disease.

Even though Debbie has extensive background in child development as a special education teacher, she was unsure how to approach each of her children in the most supportive, appropriate way. “PACT taught us to be honest and upfront with our children, because that would help them the most in the long run. We are so much closer as a family because of PACT. I was made aware of what my children were going through and how it was affecting them, and they also saw how hard it was for me. This mutual respect and understanding would never have occurred without PACT.”

The purpose of PACT is to guide parents with cancer and teach them what terminology to use, what knowledge is age appropriate, and the skills to handle certain situations that may arise. Dr. Martin explained that PACT gives parents the tools to talk to their children in a manner that is beneficial for both of them. The idea is to intervene and prevent issues from happening down the road. “When a parent is diagnosed with cancer, it doesn’t mean they stop being a parent. It’s just parenting under very stressful circumstances,” explained Dr. Martin. “The focus is on helping the parents and working with them to decide what’s best for their family. We serve as parenting coaches for the family unit.”

Bonnie Indeck, LCSW, Manager of Oncology Social Work at Smilow Cancer Hospital, co-manages the PACT program and is one of nine social workers involved. Since implementing the program over a year ago, there have been over 140 consultations. The goal is to eventually grow the program to address the needs of all parents undergoing cancer care.

“The idea of the program is to offer support and guidance to parents, including how to frame discussions with children, whether about a new diagnosis, the need for treatment, or approaching end-of-life,” Ms. Indeck said. “One of our long-term goals is to help the children remain emotionally healthy so they are able to adjust to their parent’s illness and its impact. We want the parent to focus on getting well without unnecessary worry about their children.”

After Debbie’s husband Eric passed, she was left with the questions and the grief. PACT gave her the advice and support she needed to guide her family through this time. As a way to keep his memory alive, she built a Zen garden featuring bamboo plants Eric had planted that had long been forgotten in the backyard. The garden serves as a reminder to the family of their wonderful husband and father. Debbie also recently participated in Yale Cancer Center Schwartz Rounds, a forum to help physicians, nurses, and caretakers become more aware of the importance of family involvement in care. She shared her story, and experience with PACT, to promote the service and help families who might otherwise not know about the program, or seek it out on their own. Debbie commented that it was a very positive experience, which she hopes can make a difference for another family going through a similar experience.

“I can’t imagine having gone through this without the help we received from PACT. I feel so much better knowing they are there for my family and me and can provide us with resources that will help us along the way, because this is a long-term process. Before Eric left us, he knew that his children would be okay, and that was very important for us.”