

'I'm not sure my mom would have attended the bra and panty party, but she'd certainly wear one of the T-shirts'



Mary-Jo DeCoteau

IT'S AN HOUR INTO LUNCH at her favourite café when Mary-Jo DeCoteau realizes she's been so busy talking about her charitable organization that she hasn't even taken a second bite of her now-cold roast beef and brie baguette. "This always happens to me," says DeCoteau, 34, the executive director of Rethink Breast Cancer. "I just get so worked up when talking about the cause."

Inspired by her mother, Anne—who lost her battle with breast cancer 12 years ago at 53—and the desire to educate young women who too often feel immune to one of Canada's leading killers, DeCoteau founded Rethink in 2001. It has evolved from a one-member, living room table-based project, to a stylish initiative headquartered in Toronto that collected more than \$1 million last year and has fundraising volunteers in Vancouver, Calgary and Ottawa. "I'd see interesting AIDS fundraisers aimed at young people and wonder why there couldn't be the same thing for breast cancer," says DeCoteau, who has a background in public relations. "There was a need for something edgier."

DeCoteau works with large corporate sponsors who are impressed with her creative approach of making

the battle against breast cancer relevant for her generation. She and her small team of mainly volunteers regularly host cocktail parties at swish nightclubs to raise money. One of the most popular has been the "bra and panty" party—a lingerie fashion show sponsored by the Gap. DeCoteau is also responsible for bringing the Fashion Targets Breast Cancer campaign to Canada. This year the campaign's highly recognizable T-shirts (blue target on a white shirt) are on sale nationally at Roots. "I'm not sure my mom would have attended the bra and panty party," laughs DeCoteau. "But she'd certainly wear one of the T-shirts."

A large part of Rethink's mandate is research. In fact, most of the money raised helps to fund grants for young scientists specializing in breast cancer work. DeCoteau says the birth last fall of her first child has made her even more determined to help find a cure. "I was 18 when my mom was first diagnosed and I realize my daughter could be 18 in a blink," says DeCoteau of her eight-month-old, who she named after her late mother. "Annie has made it that much more intense. I'm now more driven than ever."

BY JOHN INTINI

PHOTOGRAPH BY
WILLIAM CICCOCIOPPO