

Johnson

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(the cancer-fighting drug) tamoxifen, and 95 percent of the people on it do well. But I was one of the 5 percent where it didn't work, and the cancer recurred."

Johnson underwent radiation and chemotherapy, and she has remained cancer-free since 1998. However, she doesn't let down her guard.

"It's natural with anybody that has had breast cancer. It can recur several years later," she said. "I know people who have had (a recurrence) 15 years later, and they were healthy up to that point."

"It shows you must be very vigilant. I still see my oncologist twice a year."

However, Johnson doesn't allow cancer to rule her everyday life.

"Fortunately, I have gotten to the place where I don't think about it a lot," she said. "Any time there is an odd symptom (in a check-up), where your mind goes (toward a cancer diagnosis), then you gently reel it back in."

A FAMILY MATTER

Barb Johnson isn't the only one in her family who has faced cancer. Tim Johnson was diagnosed with prostate cancer following a Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) blood test.

"Now, (PSA) is a controversial test. But if Tim didn't have it, his prostate cancer wouldn't have been discovered," Barb said. "He was in a very aggressive form (of the disease), and he was on the younger end of it (for age)."

Cancer struck the Johnson family again this year. This time, it was the eldest son, Brooks, a re-

cruiter with the Massachusetts National Guard.

"It occurred in the sweat gland of his right index finger. He needed to have his finger amputated, but he is doing well," Barb said. "His chance of having this type of cancer is the same as winning the lottery. It's so rare that the Dana-Farber Institute, a well-known institution in Boston, is doing a study and following his progress."

Barb believes her son's cancer is related to his deployment in the Middle East. Brooks was part of the Iraqi invasion at a time when dictator Saddam Hussein ordered the burning of chemical weapons at unknown locations, she said.

The prominent presence of cancer in the family has created a major impact on the Johnsons' children, Barb said. While Brooks has battled cancer, siblings Brendan and Kelsey serve in positions dedicated to fighting cancer.

"My children are very conscientious because I had breast cancer and their father had prostate cancer," Barb said. "Brendan serves on the board of the American Cancer Society for South Dakota, and Kelsey's full-time work is with the American Association for Cancer Research."

Tim and Barb Johnson also annually sponsor a cancer-screening booth at the South Dakota State Fair in Huron.

"Usually, we have free mammograms for one day. Avera McKennan (Hospital) brings its van from Sioux Falls and works with us," Barb said. "We also give free PSA screenings. We usually serve several hundred men. We have had close to 600 men stop in."

Cancer patients and their families need emotional support during their journey, Barb said.

"It's very critical, for anyone who has cancer, that they have a strong support system," she said. "When you hear that people are

going into troubling times, you wish that you had a magic wand. You don't, but you could do a simple matter like phone calls or a nice card."

GETTING CHECKED

Barb believes the best treatment begins with early detection. However, she noted that many Americans — particularly South Dakotans — avoid check-ups for various reasons.

Many people avoid screenings or other medical care because of financial concerns, she said.

"I worry about adequate health insurance," she said. "Some people have very good health insurance, but an awful lot of people have very high deductibles or no insurance. Sometimes, the co-pays may be too high."

Johnson pointed to the success of All Women Count!, the state's breast and cervical cancer program. The program has screened 19,069 women in its 14 years, diagnosing 221 cases of breast cancer.

A similar program in Nebraska is called "Every Woman Matters."

All Women Count! provides mammograms and Pap smears to women who meet income and age guidelines. Eligible women ages 40-64 can receive a mammogram, and women ages 30-64 can receive a Pap smear.

All Women Count! uses 300 sites and 950 providers across the state that enroll and screen women. The program also provides cholesterol and blood pressure screenings for heart disease and glucose screenings for diabetes.

Women can call 1-800-738-2301 or visit www.getscreenedsd.gov to see if they are eligible for a free exam.

Excluding skin cancers, breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in South Dakota and the second leading cause of cancer deaths. In 2011, the American Cancer Society expects 540 new invasive breast cancers to be

diagnosed and 100 deaths attributed to the disease in South Dakota.

When it comes to screenings, women often put their family's needs ahead of their own, Johnson said.

"There is a very high percentage of moms in South Dakota who are working," she said. "They are busy, and they sometimes don't take care of their own health. It gets pushed aside."

Many times, distance plays a major role in not getting the needed screening and treatment, Johnson said. In a vast state such as South Dakota, many residents don't enjoy close access to medical care, she said.

"For a lot of people, they don't have the resources like they do in Yankton," she said. "For them, it may mean a great deal of traveling. You're lucky to have resources so close (in Yankton)."

FINDING A CURE

With the current budget crisis, Johnson fears the reduction or elimination of federally-funded programs for cancer detection and treatment. She also fears a cutback in federally-funded research that stands on the brink of new discoveries.

"The thing that is so disappointing is that we are so close but haven't found a cure," she said. "We were sure that we would have a cure in 10 years, and now 10 years has passed. We have a lot of good treatments, but we still need that cure."

However, Johnson remains optimistic that research, particularly for breast cancer, lies on the edge of a breakthrough.

"Now that they have an understanding of the genetic code of the DNA, I think we're going to find an answer," she said.

Johnson related a personal experience that has bolstered her hopes for a cure.

"I had a wonderful opportunity

to have lunch at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the doctor that sat beside me had a nephew that was going into medicine," she said. "The doctor told his nephew, 'Don't go into cancer research, because by the time you are done with all the training, we are going to have a cure.'"

More treatment options are already available, Johnson said.

"The medicines are much more targeted, and I think there is so much hope," she said. "(Research) didn't go fast enough for me, but you want (a cure) before your children have (cancer)."

The October observance of Breast Cancer Awareness Month has not only provided more information but also has provided breast cancer patients and their families with a feeling of support, Johnson said.

She would like to see more awareness that men are diagnosed with the disease.

"Men need to check themselves for breast cancer," she said. "Not many men have it, and they are often embarrassed to admit it."

Breast Cancer Awareness Month has also resulted in fundraisers that provide needed resources for research, detection, treatment and support programs, Johnson said.

She said her family's experiences show the importance of early detection.

"You were scared (upon learning the diagnosis), but you were fortunate enough that it was treatable," she said. "Not everybody is that fortunate."

While living with cancer has provided dark moments, Johnson said it has also given new meaning to life.

"You enjoy each day. The chances are greater that (cancer) is behind me than in front of me," she said. "It's like any disease — you've got to live with it."

S.D. Cancer Program Screens 19,000 Women

PIERRE — October's Breast Cancer Awareness Month marks a milestone for All Women Count!, the state's breast and cervical cancer program. The program has screened 19,069 women in its 14 years, diagnosing 221 cases of breast cancer.

"The success of All Women Count! would not be possible without the 300 screening sites and 950 providers across the state that enroll and screen the women," said Norma Schmidt, Cancer Program Director for the Department of Health. "Partners such as the American Cancer Society, Women's Cancer Network, Susan G. Komen Foundation, Wellmark Foundation and John T. Vucurevich Cancer Care Institute have also been instrumental in promoting screening and early detection."

All Women Count! provides mammograms and Pap smears to women who are income and age eligible. Eligible women age 40 to 64 can receive a mammogram and women 30 to 64 a Pap smear. A mammogram is a safe, low-dose X-ray of the breast that detects breast cancer in its earliest, more treatable stages. A Pap smear is a screening test that detects cervical cancer in its early stages. The program also provides cholesterol and blood pressure screens for heart disease and glucose screens for diabetes.

To find out if you are eligible for the All Women Count! Program, call the local community health services office, your health care provider, or the Department of Health toll free at 1-800-738-2301 or see the web at www.getscreenedsd.gov.

For more information about breast cancer and prevention see the American Cancer Society website at www.cancer.org.

Readers

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taking into account what it did to dad. My younger brothers were much too young to know how to cope properly. To tell the truth there is no good age to lose a parent. At the time, we were all too young to know how to help mom. Sure, we could cook, clean and comfort. But we did not have the choices or help that cancer centers provide today. If we had known, maybe we would have encouraged her to fight, stay in treatment and possibly survive.

As a RN, I understand the importance of yearly mammograms, monthly breast exams and early treatment. The American Cancer Society states that breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in women (exceeded only by lung cancer) and that breast cancer is the most common cancer among American women, except for skin cancers. The chance that breast cancer will be responsible for a woman's death is about 1 in 36 (about 3 percent). I know more than 36 women (three of them are my sisters) who are at a definite risk for cancer in our family. Men can get breast cancer, too; I have six brothers — will one of them get breast cancer?

One or more of us may face the same cancer that took mom, but we talk about it and we don't have to take the same path. I participate in breast cancer drives because I sincerely hope for a cure for this terrible disease.

I encourage everyone who reads this to be diligent; don't be afraid to seek help early detection. Today there are breast cancer survivors and patients to provide emotional support and guidance.

The doctors have new treatment plans that help to minimize the fear and pain that goes along with breast cancer. I wish that the knowledge I have now was available to me while Mom was still alive.

I know I won't be a statistic, and if I can help them, neither will my family.

THE JOURNEY

Jana Ekeren, Kristi Ekeren and Pam Schaefer

We would like to share the story of our sister Deanna, who was diagnosed with breast cancer on June 22, 2011.

A week later, our mother was diagnosed with aggressive stage-four brain cancer. Deanna is our "FAMILY HERO" as she portrays a positive attitude in her journey as well as dealing with the emotional loss of our mother who suddenly passed away July 22. Through her strong faith in God, our sister has strengthened us all in her willpower to overcome this disease.

Deanna is the fourth oldest sibling of nine children who grew up in Hartington, Neb. We were a large close family, with parents who taught us the importance of family and helping each other. Deanna now lives in The Woodlands, a suburb of Houston, with her husband and two grown sons.

Her journey began with her yearly mammogram, which looked suspicious, followed by a biopsy which was positive. Once diagnosed with breast cancer, she felt blessed to have been accepted into the prestigious MD Anderson Cancer Institute. She was diagnosed with stage-three ductal cell carcinoma and had a bilateral mastectomy with positive lymph nodes. Her treatment will involve three months of chemotherapy followed by six weeks of radiation.

Her emails have been powerful from the beginning, quoting Scrip-

ture and asking for prayers along with detailed health options and treatment plans. She has a wonderful support network of close friends and neighbors who are there when needed. Deanna has always been the "giver, organizer and supporter to many"; she now is on the receiving end and knows firsthand how much everything is appreciated.

We have been amazed at the number of people who have stepped forward to share their story with us and have reassured us "your sister will be fine as I've traveled that road." The outpouring of prayers and concern we have all been given has been humbling to our family. It affects everyone in some way or another, whether it is a loved one, friend or stranger you have never met, and you want to do everything you can to help that person or persons — they are our heroes!

"I can do everything through Him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13) ... our Mother's favorite verse has been an inspiration to us all as we journey with our "Hero Sister."

THE PRAYERS

Mary Hahn

When my mom sat me down on the side of her bed and told me of her battle she had to face, I was dumb-founded. My mom's life as well as our lives changed forever. That's when I realized that my wishes for her well being were really prayers of hope.

They worked for 25 years. Thank you, God, for the extra time with her.

THE AWARENESS

Jean Koupl

I do not consider my story of surviving breast cancer unique because there are many women who have gone through what I have gone through.

It was nine years ago that I

heard the words "Jean, you have breast cancer." My type of cancer was a very aggressive type, so I am very blessed to be here today. I feel that the reason that I am here today is to pass on to everyone the loving kindness that was given me when I was diagnosed by helping all women truly understand how vital awareness and early detection are to survival.

One year ago, I started crocheting necklaces to promote breast cancer awareness, thinking that I would make a few and perhaps raise a few hundred dollars. What happened next was absolutely overwhelming! Actually, to date I have made hundreds of necklaces and donated the money to raise breast cancer awareness. At this point, I know that hundreds of women are wearing these necklaces in at least 30 different states and in several foreign countries. But it really is not about crocheting necklaces; it is about the awareness that the necklaces have created.

There are so many good efforts to raise awareness and I feel fortunate that my project is helping in that regard. For example, Avera Sacred Heart Hospital in Yankton

sponsors the "Pink Lady" group which I am honored to be one of five Breast Cancer Survivors they feature in an ongoing campaign to raise awareness. And, also I am truly humbled to have been chosen as the 2011 Honorary Breast Cancer Survivor for the Susan Komen Race for the Cure.

To me, it is very important to thrive after cancer, not simply survive and so my mission is to help all women understand and realize the importance of self-exams and mammograms. So together, let us each be that little spark that will start the flame to spread Breast Cancer Awareness!

THE ANGEL

Emily Manas

My grandma loved angels. Whether it was sweatshirts, figurines or her cross-stitch patterns, angels were everywhere in her house.

No one would figure she would become one so early in her life. My grandma, Joyce Ellen Houck, died on a chilly Valentine's Day after a long, courageous battle of breast cancer.

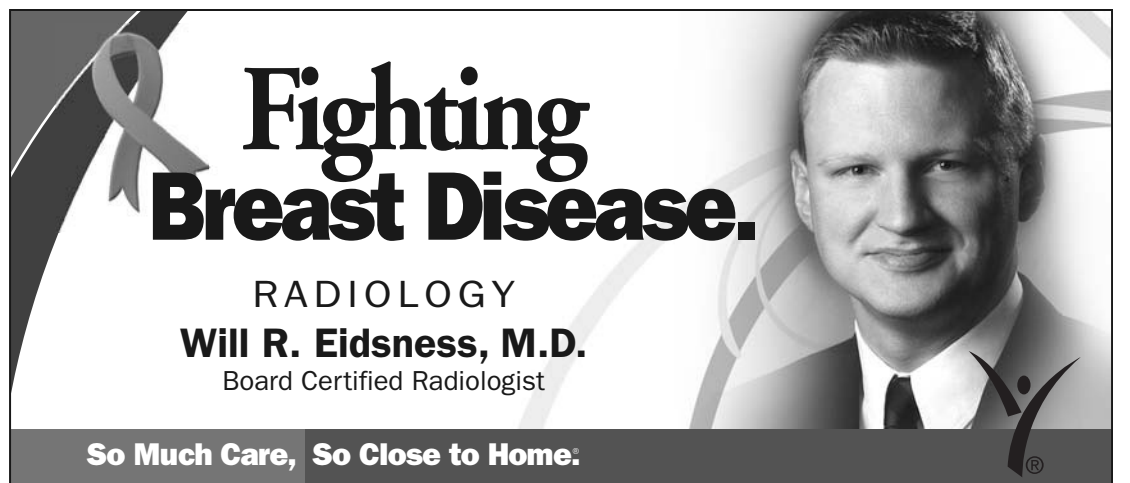
I remember discovering she had cancer. My mom sat us down

and told us that Grandma was sick, and that she was going to be sick for a while. My mom was sad; she cried and tried not to think about the future. Grandma, however, was opposite of my mother. She simply said to not be sad, and she remained optimistic.

Grandma remained this way throughout her battle. She went through scary obstacles: from her cancer spreading, to landing in the hospital, to going into remission. Somehow she remained strong and didn't let this hold her down. Even towards the end of her life, when the cancer came back, she didn't become sad; she became accepting of her faith.

The thing I miss most about my grandma is her courage; she was the bravest woman I know. She didn't take crap from anybody and stood her ground.

Every year since my grandma has been gone, Valentine's Day gets a little bit harder each year, not having her here with us. However, we all know that she is in a better place, not suffering anymore, being what she loved the most — an angel. She became all of our family's guardian angel.



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