

Battling breast cancer

Three women's journey from diagnosis to activism

By Vicki Wilson

If life is a journey, then facing a serious illness can certainly be characterized as a major fork in the road. The traveler must decide which path to take-how she will respond to this transforming challenge.

Hundreds of Chicago-area women who have experienced breast cancer responded by taking steps – 60 miles worth – to raise awareness as well as money for early detection services when they participated in “AVON’s Breast Cancer 3 Day” last summer.

No “walk in the park,” the event covered over 60 miles in three days, and it wasn’t heavily peopled with top-notch athletes in peak condition. Participants were often survivors, whose physical condition was somewhat compromised by treatment. Sometimes walkers participated to support a loved one who has suffered or even been lost to the disease. Many walked just because they believe it’s important to work towards eradicating a disease which can affect any woman, any time.

Over 2,000 people took part in the Chicago Walk, which extended from Kenosha, Wisconsin to Chicago and took place this past June. Each participant has a story to tell – of fear, determination, courage, loss, support and hope. Challenged by breast cancer and veterans of the Chicago Walk, the following three women relate experiences both unique and shared.

Saying 100 blessings a day

For Highland Parker Faye Tillis Lewy, cancer is something she is living with, rather than dying from. She even takes exception to calling herself a “survivor” of the cancer which took her left breast, went into remission, then reappeared in her spine, pelvis and bones before going into remission again.

“Survivor means holocaust to me,” she explains. “I’ve lived through a traumatic thing, and I’m surviving.”

Since last November, Lewy has had 17 chemotherapy treatments, and her cancer is “asleep” for now.

“Hope is not the same as optimism, knowing it will be OK,” says Lewy. “Hope is making the best of what it is whether it’s OK or not, and trying to find meaning in life.”

The three-day walk was a source of great meaning for Lewy. Unfortunately, she was actively undergoing treatment when it took place.

“On day zero, I was walking on eggshells because I had developed hand and foot syndrome from my treatment, which causes pain and swelling, with red blisters on my hands and feet,” she explains.

Lewy walked as far as she could, before she sadly surrendered to the sweep van. “I so badly wanted to do this; I had raised \$17,000 in pledges,” she says.

But Lewy’s disappointment didn’t last for long. She still found a meaningful way to participate – she drove from pit stop to pit stop in her most comfortable shoes.

“What could have been heartbreaking was wonderful and life-affirming,” she says. “I had such a sense of accomplishment, pride and purpose, especially watching the sea of navy blue [shirts] give way to the pink [survivor] shirts at the closing ceremony. I thought, ‘thank you, God, for letting me live and have this experience; when I’m sad, or thinking of things I’ll miss, I’ll remember this.’”

Living life at its fullest capacity is what seems to drive Lewy. And it didn’t take her illness to jump start her life. A much earlier tragedy set this philosophy in motion.

“I was 16 when my father died, and I remember lying in bed, hearing the wind in the trees, and being acutely aware of early summer, and that I had woken up and my dad hadn’t. I felt it was my responsibility to appreciate everything he couldn’t. We need to see the world with new eyes every day; and I think that helped. I love life.

“It’s a Jewish tradition to say 100 blessings every day. I open myself up to the beauty and pleasure [of life]. I’m really acutely aware of the blessings around me. I’m so grateful to be alive.”

Get busy living or get busy dying

“Having cancer has made me realize how precious every day is,” says Sandra DeSico of Chicago. “When I was younger, I was always thinking ‘I can’t wait for vacation, for the weekend’ – I was forgetting about today.”

Three days DeSico will never forget were the ones she spent walking every step of the Avon walk. To make them even more memorable, she shared then with her daughter, Karla Shelton.

DeSico was particularly interested in the contribution the walk’s proceeds would make towards early detection. “I wanted to raise money for early detection, so I decided to participate and I called my daughter and told her so.” Three days later Shelton called back to say she wanted to go, too.

“This walk was very important to my mother, and my mother is very important to me,” Shelton explained at the end of the walk.

In turn, DeSico’s family is very important to her. Before her diagnosis, DeSico unexpectedly came into some money She decided to plan a fabulous surprise vacation for herself and her children.

“We had never gone on vacation, and I wanted a trip with just them. I rented a sailboat in the British Virgin Islands, complete with a French crew to cook for us,” she says. She began presenting her children with hints about their upcoming mystery adventure at Christmas (the trip was to take place in April).

When the cancer struck in January, she wondered if it was God’s way of saying the trip was the last time the family would all be together. Instead, after a lumpectomy and radiation, the trip became a celebration of her getting well. “It was so glorious to see all of my children together,” she says.

Volunteers needed for early detection program

The Chicago-based Y-Me National Breast Cancer Organization offers an on-going early detection program for high school seniors. Piloted in 1991, the volunteer-run program is in need of breast cancer survivors who are interested in presenting self-examination and early detection information to girls in high school.

Just a little bump in the road

Maria Hibbs’ number one objective throughout her cancer treatment was to “make life as normal as possible.” Just three days after her lumpectomy, she was in Washington, D.C. on a business trip.

No woman knows when breast cancer may strike. Hibbs feels that when and if it does, staying positive is the only way to survive. Questioning it or dwelling on it won’t get you anywhere.

“You don’t have a choice, you do what you have to do,” she says. Hibbs feels there’s no point in asking “why me, or why God did this to me.

“It’s an irrelevant question. God didn’t do this to you, God is in the people who help you through it.”

One of the people who helped Hibbs is her husband David. For Christmas and her birthday, David eschewed jewelry or clothing and presented his wife with a registration in the 3-Day.

“I received a lot of nice presents for both occasions, but this was the best and most meaningful,” Maria says.

Since Maria’s recovery, she and David have adopted a healthier lifestyle, which includes daily morning walks. So the training for the breast cancer walk was already a part of their life. Still, Maria admits the walk was “harder than we thought. We thought it would be a snap!

“Day one was very difficult – my feet really hurt; day two was easier, and day three was even easier. My husband is so encouraging. It was so great to walk into Lincoln Park and see all these people welcoming us. We looked at each other like we were heroes. Our spirits really soared, and suddenly, our feet didn’t hurt so badly.”

Vicki Wilson is a freelance writer from Oak Park.