

features

The FIGHT against breast cancer

STEVE SHRENKEL
Reporter

Forty-five is a number that will forever be etched into the mind of Elizabeth Papp.

Papp was 45 years old when she and her husband saw their three kids graduate from high school. They were ready to establish themselves and move onto the next chapter of their lives. Everything seemed perfect.

Except it was not – 45 years old was when everything changed.

This was the first time that Papp was diagnosed with breast cancer and would begin a fight that would last for many years to come.

It came as a complete shock when she was diagnosed, she said.

“I remember finding a little lump on my breast and while I scheduled a doctor to look at it, I really thought nothing of it,” Papp said. “That all changed when I got a call one day from the doctors who said my husband had called off work and was waiting there for me to hear the results.”

Since the disease was only Stage I, the doctors took the tumor out with a partial mastectomy and gave her a breast implant.

While it was a difficult diagnosis to hear, she said that the doctors

tated to hear that not only had the cancer come back but that it was Stage II as well. I remember calling my daughter to tell her and she had just burst into tears.”

The fight against Stage II was completely different than the first time around, she said.

Papp had to undergo a full mastectomy, where she elected to not get another breast implant.

From there, she had to receive chemotherapy, radiation treatment and constantly take pills, she said.

“It was a pretty tough at the time,” Papp said. “I was tired a lot. The chemo made me a little sick. All I could really eat were suckers and popsicles at the time.”

The radiation treatment was also difficult, she said.

“I had burn marks from the radiation,” Papp said. “It was pretty painful to go through.”

Besides feeling sick, Papp had also lost all of her hair in the process of undergoing such intensive treatment.

This led to a tough mental struggle as well for her, she said.

“That was probably the toughest thing to go through,” Papp said. “I wore a hat all the time and never wanted to take it off.”

Papp decided during her treatment to join a breast cancer sup-



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY: ELIZABETH PAPP

Papp during the time she was first diagnosed with Stage I breast cancer.

something that really weighed on my mind for many years.”

Even when cancer is removed, that does not mean that you are in complete remission, Demers said.

“You are not technically in remission unless you don’t see any signs or symptoms of the cancer for five or more years,” she said.

years old, according to Demers.

75 percent of people diagnosed with breast cancer are over 50 years old and 75 percent of breast cancers can be cured with current therapy, she said.

There are a few different ways that women reduce their risk of developing breast cancer in their lifetime.

One of the top ways to reduce risk is to live a healthy lifestyle, Demers said.

“Exercise has been associated with a 15-30 percent risk reduction in postmenopausal women,” she said. “Maintaining a normal body weight and making sure your dietary fat intake is low or moderate can help to reduce the risk of developing breast cancer.”

Papp recommends that all women try and go once a year for a mammogram, even if it is uncomfortable, she said.

“I recommend that all women go and get checked at least once a year,” Papp said. “I think some women don’t like the discomfort during them and others are afraid they may actually be told that they have breast cancer.”

Even though she eventually left her support group, Papp still recommends that any one with breast cancer try to find as many support groups and resources as possible, she said.

“Even though it got tough near the end, the support group really did help me,” Papp said.

There are many resources that women can find and use when it comes to dealing with breast cancer. Both the CDC and National Breast Cancer Foundation have resources on their websites.

The Ashland County Cancer Association is a local resource that residents living in Ashland can use when dealing with any type of cancer.

Angela Woodward, the executive director of the program, said that the cancer association is one of the best kept secrets in Ashland.

“We are a great resource in Ashland,” she said. “Our main service is to provide financial assistance to those in Ashland County.”

When it comes to breast cancer, the ACCA provides free mammograms to women in Ashland County that do not have insurance.

“We work closely with the Ohio Department of Health’s Breast and Cervical Cancer Project and Samaritan Hospital to make sure that those diagnosed with breast cancer get the fullest care,” Woodward said. “Last year, we were able to help 124 women who were diagnosed with breast cancer.”

The ACCA also provides travel stipends for those who need to go to radiation or chemotherapy appointments and can help with medication costs, she said.

“We try to provide as much support as possible,” Woodward said.

Currently, Papp is 81 years old. She now has three grandchildren and is completely cancer free.

She will forever remember her fight with breast cancer and has advice for anyone currently struggling with the disease, she said.

“Have a good support system behind you,” Papp said. “No matter what happens, always try to stay positive. I think that’s the most important thing you can do.”



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY: ELIZABETH PAPP

Papp during her second fight with Stage II breast cancer after she began remission.

told her the disease was essentially cured after the surgery.

“I was so happy to be cured,” she said. “I thought after that had happened, I would never have to worry about breast cancer again.”

October is breast cancer awareness month. Like Papp, many women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Protection, every year in the U.S., more than 200,000 women will get breast cancer and more than 40,000 women die from the disease each year.

Dr. Marion Demers, a family medicine practitioner in Shelby, OH, said that besides skin cancer, breast cancer is one of the most common cancers in American women.

“11 percent of women will develop some sort of breast cancer during their lifetime,” Demers said. “The majority will develop a localized Stage I type and will be cured.”

While many women are cured for breast cancer, recurrence of the disease is still a major problem, she said.

“Over 1 million women will have Stage II or Stage III breast cancer,” Demers said. “A lot of that comes from a recurrence issue with women who were previously diagnosed with breast cancer.”

That was exactly what had happened to Papp, who at 63 years old, was diagnosed with breast cancer yet again. This time it was Stage II.

Papp had found another lump on her breast implant from the first time, she said.

“I remember just feeling a sense of dread when I had found that lump,” Papp said. “I was devas-

port group which really helped her to deal with the disease and all of the effects that came from it.

“They really helped push me through all of the struggles that I was going through,” Papp said. “They told me that we were all in this together and got me to get rid of my hat and not be defined by the disease.”

While the counseling did help for a while, it was still tough to hear other people’s stories, especially those who were more sick than Papp, she said.

“I remember there was a lady that got so sick that she eventually died from the cancer,” she said.

“That was really hard to go through since I was still undergoing treatment for my breast cancer. There were many times that I questioned if I was going to make it or not. It really made me depressed at certain points and eventually I had to stop going to counseling.”

Even though the counseling had stopped, Papp still had an enormous support system from her close friends and family.

“Luckily, I had a great treatment team and my family was always there for me during the whole process,” Papp said.

After a couple of tough months and a successful surgery, Papp finally stopped getting treatment for her breast cancer.

This, however, did not mean that she was cancer free.

Papp’s breast cancer was in remission, but she still had to get an exam by a doctor every few months to make sure the cancer was not coming back.

“It felt great to hear that I was in remission,” Papp said. “But every time I had to go for an exam, I was nervous that the cancer would start to come back. It was

“Even then, some cancer cells can remain in your body for many years after treatment.”

Papp’s breast cancer was finally declared to be in complete remission a few years later.

“I was so happy,” she said. “It just felt so good to finally be done with it.”

The median age for a breast cancer diagnosis is currently 55



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY: ELIZABETH PAPP

81-year-old Papp is now a two-time breast cancer survivor.