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## October is National BREAST CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

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*Breast cancer can affect anyone, even someone right here in our newspaper family. Lib Stewart, retired news editor of The Kings Mountain Herald and now part-time staff writer of The Cherryville Eagle, shares her personal account of her survival of breast cancer.*



The 'C' word - hearing a doctor say, "It's cancer." - strikes fear in anyone, but for a woman, breast cancer can be especially devastating because it attacks the very essence of a woman's femininity and womanhood. If detected early enough, breast cancer is 97 percent survivable.

Sixteen years ago on May 23, 1988, by the grace of God and early detection of cancer by a mammogram, I became a survivor. The prayer that I prayed, "Lord, help me to accept the things I cannot change," the support of family, church and friends and a positive attitude sustained me.

My experience with cancer began with a routine visit to the local hospital for a mammogram in early May 1988 where I also made pictures of new mammography equipment and wrote a story for The Kings Mountain Herald. On May 11, 1988, my doctor gave me the results of the test. It looked suspicious, but he didn't find any lumps and as a precaution ordered a needle biopsy. There was never a history of breast cancer in my family. I was healthy, but my father died of cancer at age 75 on September 5, 1983.

"Thy will be done," I prayed over and over, but I was scared. On May 16, 1988, my sister-in-law, Mary Jo Stewart, accompanied me to Kings Mountain Hospital for the biopsy.

On Wednesday, May 18, the surgeon told me I was in perfect health. I threw on my clothes to return to work. The telephone rang and I heard the doctor say, "I don't believe it. I'm on my way."

I was out the door when the nurse called me to wait. The doctor had gone to the hospital to check the slides and the shocked expression on his face reconfirmed my fear when he returned to the examination room.

"Lib, I don't know how to tell you this except to say it. The last slide showed the malignancy."

Cancer. The doctor told me in the very kindness way that I had breast cancer.

I remember that I sat there in a daze as he spoke to me of options, a lumpectomy with radiation if I preferred, breast reconstruction.

"This is all a nightmare," I kept thinking. "What are you recommending?" I finally asked. "A modified radical mastectomy."

"What!" I exclaimed. "You mean removal of the breast?"

He nodded and then the tears came and from God came the faith to endure and to survive and live.

"You can wait a couple of weeks, get a second or third opinion and see a cancer specialist," the doctor said.

It was not courage that helped me make a decision that saved my life, but some God-given strength.

"Schedule the surgery for Monday," I said.

News reporters are supposed to have tough skins, but this reporter was scared to death.



**Above, Lib Stewart points to the Blue Cross-Blue Shield of North Carolina Button Chair, which was a model for a breast cancer awareness project she pushed as national president of the American Legion Auxiliary in 1999-2000.**

On Monday, May 23, 1988, Mary Jo and I returned to the local hospital at 6:30 a.m. They teased me that I brought my own nurses with me. Mary Jo, wife of my brother, Gary, is a registered nurse and at the time was with McGill Clinic and now with Cleveland Home Health, and Beverly Stewart Berry, my niece, is a nurse in the intensive care unit at Kings Mountain Hospital.

"I just wanted to tell you, I told my doctor that I know we agreed that the operation would be so that I could have reconstruction, but the important thing is to get the cancer out, regardless of how you do it," I said.

He patted me on the head and said, "I know and I plan to do that."

The surgery went well. I required no radiation, no chemotherapy and no exercise.

"You are one of the lucky ones," my doctor told me. "You have a 95 to 100 percent chance cancer will never reoccur. I can't tell too many of my cancer patients that."

Nearly four weeks after my surgery, I was back at my desk at The Herald.

If detected early enough breast cancer is survivable and I am grateful for that.

It is this message of optimism that I took to 50 states and eight foreign countries as national president of the American Legion Auxiliary in 1999-2000. I felt that with its membership of nearly one million women, that this was an issue to advocate. Being the leader of the world's largest women's patriotic service organization gave me the platform to spread this message of hope.

Everywhere I have spoken to men and women I have said that "I stand before you by the grace of God and because of early detection of breast cancer by a mammogram." All ages of women in virtually every state I visited pledged to have yearly mammograms.

For its first objective in our community service program, we pushed increasing awareness through the promotion of early detection and education on the disease itself. We also reminded our audiences that while women predominately are diagnosed with breast cancer, it can happen to men as well. One to three percent of breast cancer patients are men.

We told our audiences that part of the reason women do not get a mammogram lies in fear. However, if something is abnormal, finding it early is one's best defense. A mammogram can detect a lump years before a woman could discover it on her own. Moreover, it is comforting to know that even if something questionable is detected, more than 80 percent of lumps or suspicious areas are not cancerous.

A biopsy, a minor operation where a thin needle removes a small amount of tissue to determine if the lump is malignant, is the only way to know if cancer is present. Breast cancer treatment can include a lumpectomy, limited surgery, which removes the cancer, but not the entire breast, radiation, mastectomy, chemotherapy and hormone treatment.

While there are a number of measures which can be taken to lower one's risk of getting breast cancer, it cannot be prevented. Both the cause and its cure remain undiscovered, but today there is an estimated two million breast cancer survivors in the United States. The role that diet, weight and environmental factors play in the development of breast cancer is being continuously studied.

Generally, a regimen of regular exercise, a low-fat diet, alcohol moderation and a smoke-free lifestyle is recommended to lower risks of breast cancer, as well as other forms of cancer. Also, there is no correlation between breast size and

cancer risk.

Along with awareness, the legion auxiliary's emphasis in 1999-2000 enhanced resources available. One resource is the 'Tell A Friend' program where each participant encourages others to tell a friend about mammograms. Twenty-five percent of those who get a mammogram do so because a friend encouraged it.

A project which started in North Carolina, but is now going national due to its overwhelming response is the Blue Cross-Blue Shield Breast Cancer Button Chair. I invited a representative of Blue Cross-Blue Shield of North Carolina to take the chair with its thousands of colorful buttons to a national meeting in Washington, DC in March 2000. The idea to decorate chairs with buttons representing survivors caught on as my national president's project for breast cancer.

Since my return home to Kings Mountain, the mailman has been busy delivering chairs of all sizes decorated with buttons. It is the stories behind the buttons that give the chairs the powerful impact. Each button represents a life and a victory.

Proceeds from my national president's project related to breast cancer awareness were divided between the button chair project and the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, the nation's leading catalyst in the fight against breast cancer and sponsor of the Komen Race for the Cure. The money is being used not only for research, but to help women who can't afford treatments.

Why did I share my personal experiences? Because I have learned that attitude is a key to survival of most any challenges of life, especially cancer.

When I returned to normal routines, I noticed little things that I never noticed before. I appreciated even more the small kindnesses of family and friends and I noticed the beauty of nature and its wonders more intensely. Sunny days, laughing kids and small things that most people miss. After cancer, I found I treasured life's friendships more and probably have gained more out of life this past 16 years than ever before. That in itself is an enriching experience.

Yes, cancer is scary. Six members of my family have had bouts with cancer, three survived. The heart of our family, our mother, died on March 22, 2001 of heart disease. Six survivors from our church participate annually in the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life. Many friends in the Kings Mountain area have had bouts with cancer.

Yes, people die of cancer every day, but people are also run over by drunk drivers and defective wiring causes a family to perish in a house fire. We hear and read about tragedies and call these people victims of fate. Yet, fate will have no part in the deaths of many women from breast cancer this year.

Early detection saves lives, but because we are human we are afraid of what we may find out when we go for a check-up or a mammogram and so we put it off until tomorrow. Many times, lumps are not malignant.

I hope this personal account will say to people who face any form of cancer that you cannot only survive, but you can triumph and flourish and have active, meaningful and productive lives just like me, a survivor of breast cancer.



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