

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

November 3, 2008

Rays of Hope

Rays of Hope! That's the name of last month's fundraising walk in Springfield to fight breast cancer. And it's my topic for this week's Byline, specifically the "rays of hope," that concern breast cancer prevention, treatment and cure.

Cancer has no season, though October holds the official designation as National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. The full month focused on reminding, encouraging and persuading women to be aware of their breast cancer risks. Using the premise that the best offense is a good defense, I am writing these words for my women readers. If you do not read beyond this paragraph, you should know that the single best defense is regular mammograms!

Nobody wants to think or read about cancer, but our awareness can be life-saving. The fact that one in 8 women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime means our risks are real.

Prevention is our first defense, though it can more accurately be called risk-reduction. Your family history can be a predictor, and if you have close relatives with breast or ovarian cancer, you should be working with a physician to protect your health.

Of course you should not smoke -- or break the habit if you are a smoker. Lung cancer kills more of us than breast cancer even though it is less common. It helps if you minimize the use of hormone replacement therapy and lead a healthy lifestyle. However, even the most health-conscious woman in the world cannot eliminate her breast cancer risk.

Detection comes next, so discuss your risks with your physician and follow regular checkups to catch any signs of cancer at the earliest stage.

About 90 % of breast cancer patients have no known risk factors, so it is important to know your own body and report changes or lumps from self-examination. If you are over 40, schedule yearly mammograms, which can detect breast cancer years before symptoms appear. Expanded use of mammography is a primary factor in improving survival rates.

If you are diagnosed with breast cancer, you have many options for treatment. The 21st century is the best time in history to face the disease. Radical surgery is a thing of the past, and chemotherapy has changed to limit the harsh side effects of earlier years. Treatments can target blood supply or cellular structure of your tumor. Ongoing research constantly offers expanded options for treatment. The 5-year survival rate is a standard measure in cancer statistics, and it is now 98% when breast cancer is diagnosed in its earliest stage.

Now, back to Rays of Hope. The walk raises \$850,000 for local cancer efforts, patient services and research, and all funds stay in our region. In its 15th year, 13,000 participants joined the walk through Forest Park. It was an inspirational crowd marching in honor or memory of their friends.

I posed with hundreds of other survivors for a celebratory photograph. I came to a new realization of the huge number of families that are affected by breast cancer. And I returned home with the mission to spread this message to readers by writing today's Byline.