

I WAS AT THE RIGHT PLACE

YOUNG CANCER PATIENT FINDS SUPPORT AT BREAST CARE CENTER

BY ANDREA MONGLER

When Raylene Hollrah was 33, she and her husband decided to have a second child. So she scheduled an appointment with her obstetrician-gynecologist, Daniel Wagner, MD, of St. Luke's Hospital.

Raylene expected a routine appointment. Little did she know it would be her first step in a sometimes-terrifying journey.

Dr. Wagner found a lump in Raylene's right breast.

Neither a mammogram nor an ultrasound showed cancer. "But Dr. Wagner – being the wonderful physician he is – referred me to Dr. Fahrner," Raylene says. "Dr. Wagner provided an amazing level of personal care."

So on April 10, 2007, Raylene met with Mari Anne Fahrner, MD, a general surgeon at St. Luke's Breast Care Center. She underwent a needle biopsy that same day.

"The Breast Center can provide a diagnosis rapidly," Dr. Fahrner says. "Usually we have the results to the patient within 24 hours – sometimes within eight hours."



4 health & harmony fall 2008

The Hollrahs are taking steps on the next journey of their lives together.

On April 11, Dr. Fahrner called Raylene with the news: She had Stage 2 breast cancer.

“Often when young women have lumps, they are benign,” Dr. Fahrner says. “But in Raylene’s case it was infiltrating ductal carcinoma. She had a medium-sized tumor with no nodal involvement.”

The very next day Raylene came to the Breast Care Center to meet with Dr. Fahrner again.

“It’s so important to go to a doctor and a hospital you feel comfortable with. There’s no question I was at the right place,” Raylene says. “I was greeted warmly by the nurses to start my journey, and then Dr. Fahrner and I discussed our options – I say ‘our’ because she was very much a part of my journey. My husband, mom and best friend were with me, and Dr. Fahrner spent an hour and a half with us.”

Raylene decided to have a bilateral mastectomy. On April 20 – just nine days after Raylene’s diagnosis – Dr. Fahrner performed the surgery. She removed all the cancerous cells in Raylene’s right breast and precancerous cells in her left breast.

“I had such a wonderful doctor and team at the Breast Care Center,” Raylene says. “And I’ve also completely changed my life since my diagnosis. I’ve changed my eating habits and exercise routine and have a lot of faith. It’s a holistic approach, and today I’m living at 100 percent.”

The Breast Care Center offers a full range of diagnostic and treatment options, including screening and diagnostic mammography, physical exams, ultrasounds, biopsies, MRIs and PET scans. It also provides genetic and supportive

counseling. In addition, the American College of Radiology’s Commission on Quality and Safety and the Commission on Breast Imaging have designated St. Luke’s Hospital’s Department of Radiology a Breast Imaging Center of Excellence – one of only three in Missouri.

“Several departments are consolidated right here in our building, and we all work very closely together,” says Sally Rappold, nurse manager at the Breast Care Center. “Patients only need to come to one place, and we can coordinate all their appointments. We have radiation oncology on the first floor and medical oncology on the third floor.”

The building is also home to St. Luke’s Cancer Resource Center, which provides educational materials to cancer patients.

After Raylene had surgery, she went through four months of chemotherapy with Julie Gill, MD, at St. Luke’s.

“Dr. Gill was another addition to my wonderful St. Luke’s team,” Raylene says. “She was incredible – she explained everything and answered my questions. When I had concerns, I would call the office, and I always got a call back.”

From Day One, the staff members at the Breast Care Center were just as impressed with Raylene as she was with them.

“Everyone here was amazed by her,” Dr. Fahrner says. “She always had such a positive, upbeat attitude. She not only handled her own situation with courage and grace but reached out to others.”

Specifically, Raylene bonded with Inga, another young breast cancer

patient she met at the Breast Care Center. Inga, a 31-year-old mother of five, and Raylene traded stories about their disease and their children. Raylene even traveled to Houston to visit Inga, who had been sent there for treatment.

Raylene, who sells insurance, also served as a source of comfort and inspiration for Rhonda, one of her clients who was diagnosed with breast cancer, and for her daughter’s pediatrician, whose wife had received her own diagnosis.

“Just as much as chemo was part of my treatment, so was talking to and helping others,” Raylene says.

But it wasn’t always easy for her to stay positive and upbeat. While sitting in the waiting room at the Breast Care Center before learning the results of her surgery, she was scared and distraught – to the point of tears. That’s when she met Cindy, an 11-year breast cancer survivor.

“Cindy told me: ‘I never stopped living because of cancer. I don’t want to say that I just wasted 11 years.’ That became my theme,” Raylene says.

This September, Raylene had her final reconstructive surgery. It was the last stage of the most difficult journey of her life. She says her doctors and nurses gave her the support she needed every step of the way.

“I felt so good about being at St. Luke’s. It really sets itself apart,” she says. “You can be standing in the hall, looking at a directory, and even doctors stop to see if they can help you. People at St. Luke’s are incredible.” ■