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Family takes pride in woman's victory over breast cancer

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BOYERTOWN — Although she's helped hundreds of other women deal with their breast cancer diagnosis, it's quite possible, and very apparent, that the people most grateful for Hazel LeVan's fighting spirit and successful battle against cancer are her husband and children.

"I'm so proud," Joan Comtois, Hazel's daughter, said, getting teary-eyed. "My mom's a survivor."

Hazel's journey to her present state of being cancer free started in May of 1984.

"I had a virus, a regular common virus," Hazel said. She recalled losing a bit of weight because she was sick. "I remember going like this" she said, rubbing her chest, "and thinking 'of all the places I don't want to lose weight.'"

She thought that perhaps something wasn't right. Perhaps she had more than a common virus. She called her

doctor.

“I made the appointment for Saturday morning,” Hazel said. “Monday morning I got the call saying ‘which surgeon do you want.’”

Hazel was just 51-years-old. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

She underwent treatment, including a mastectomy to remove the cancer and radiation and six months of chemotherapy. Although having cancer take a toll on any person’s life, Hazel said it was something she didn’t talk much about at the time, as talking about cancer, especially breast cancer, was something that people didn’t do back then.

“Cancer just was not talked about,” she said. “I didn’t talk to my children about it.”

Hazel recalled one of her four daughters finally breaking the silence with her.

“I remember my middle daughter coming into the bathroom saying ‘I want to see your incision,’” Hazel said.

After being diagnosed in a time when people were silent about cancer, and having to be somewhat quiet about it herself, Hazel said she decided to do something to change that for other women in the future.

“If only I had someone I could’ve called to talk to,” Hazel said.

She spoke to her oncology nurse, Peggy Neese, who is now the director of the Pottstown Memorial Regional Cancer Center, and started the Breast Cancer Support Group there.

“I was helping myself, but at the same time helping others,” Hazel said.

She recalled seeing the group grow over the years. There were about 20 women attending the meetings when Hazel finally stopped going a few years back. She hadn’t stopped going to the meetings until after she found someone to replace her there, and the group still meets regularly, providing peer support for women who are surviving their battles with breast cancer.

Hazel also signed up for the Relay for Life of Pottstown. She was a member of Bosom Buddies, which was started by people who had been touched by breast cancer.

Hazel said Relay is an opportunity to really take action and actually produce something tangible in the fight against cancer, something she desperately wanted to influence given that she didn’t want her children and grandchildren to face a diagnosis like she did. Or, if they did, they would have more tools to fight the fight with.

“I had four daughters,” Hazel said. “That’s four daughters I don’t want to go through this.”

In addition to raising money for Relay for Life to help battle cancer, Hazel has also helped to arm her daughters with knowledge and know how so that they can be one step ahead of the game.

“I get my mammograms every year and my yearly checkups,” Comtois said, noting that her mother instilled in her the importance of being proactive in the fight against cancer.

Hazel even got her husband John to join the cause.

“When I retired, I was on The Road to Recovery,” John said, explaining that Hazel signed him up to be a volunteer with the Road to Recovery program at the cancer center that pairs volunteers with people who need transportation to and from cancer treatments.

“When he retired, the next day he was signed up,” Hazel said grinning.

Hazel has also been an advocate for others who are undergoing cancer treatment, although she is more apt to call herself a “buddy”.

She volunteers with Reach to Recovery, a program that pairs volunteers with people who are battling cancer, and helps give them practical information, such as helping a woman who has undergone a mastectomy the best places to get a bathing suit, and other things that will enable them to move on with their lives.

Hazel’s enthusiasm has even gone to the dogs, as Comtois’s dog, (also Hazel’s “granddog”) Brinkley, raised the most money of any other member of the Canines For A Cure team in 2007. This year, Brinkley is also the Grand Marshal for the Canine Relay this year, being held April 19.

Comtois said she is motivated to fundraise with Brinkley and for Relay by her mother, a person who has done so much so selflessly.

“I’m proud of my mother and I want my mother to be proud of me and Brinkley,” she said.

Hazel explained that dogs like Brinkley and her own dog Mia, provide people battling cancer with an unequalled friendship.

“Family sometimes wants to tell you ‘it’s OK,’” Hazel said. But “sometimes you just want something to hug.”

Having gotten so many people involved in the fight against cancer, and having been so involved herself, Hazel is modest about her accomplishments.

“It just goes back to helping others,” she said.