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Inspired to give others hope



By Brandie Kessler

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POTTSTOWN — Captaining a team that raised more than \$61,000 for the Relay for Life last year is simply Kathy Brennan's way of fulfilling her end of the bargain.

Brennan, the chairwoman for the 2008 Relay for Life event and the head of her relay team, Kathy's Crew, made a deal with God six years ago that if she could make it through her cancer diagnosis and beat the odds against her, she would do whatever she could to help others not suffer the same way she did.

"There's more people now who live with cancer than die from it," Brennan said. The Relay "gives people hope that if they know someone who's diagnosed ... it's not a death sentence."

In September 2001, Brennan received the news that she had stage III B inflammatory breast cancer. This particular type of cancer is especially difficult to diagnose because there are no lumps or bumps, Brennan said.

She noted that inflammatory breast cancer is often initially misdiagnosed as mastitis, or a breast infection, because the symptoms include redness, swelling and pain.

Because of the difficulty diagnosing the disease at the time Brennan was diagnosed there was not a high survival rate.

Only "5 percent of women (diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer) reached their five-year mark" of being cancer free and surviving, Brennan said.

Although that diagnosis is daunting, Brennan, happily married with two young sons, fought the disease with aggressive chemotherapy and surgery, followed by more chemotherapy and more surgery to rid her body of cancer on both sides. After about a year of treatments she was cancer-free.

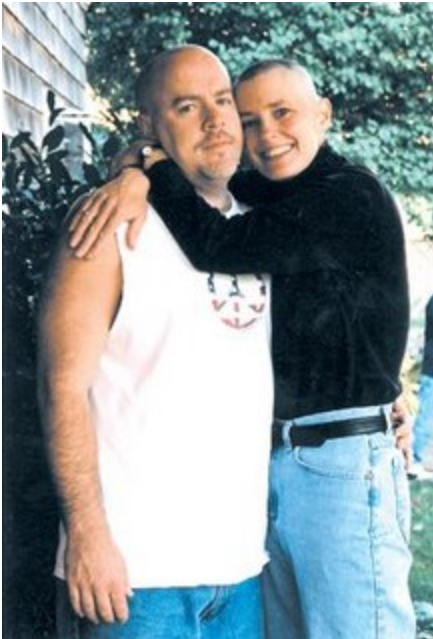
However, the journey through the treatments wasn't an easy one.

"It's one of the most unnerving things" she said of the experience of losing her hair from the chemotherapy treatments. She explained how just washing her hair was a difficult thing to do, because so much of it would end up in her hands. She would wash her hands clean of hair, and then forget before running her towel through her hair and losing more of it.

Combatting the hair loss, Brennan's husband shaved her head.

"For me, it was a very empowering thing," she said.

Without her husband, Dan, Brennan said she doesn't know how she would have made it through.



"He is such a sweetheart," she said. "I don't know how I could have done it without him."

She also said her friends, especially a group of friends who used to get together when her children were young for play dates, helped to get her through her battle.

It was these friends and family members who joined Brennan back when she decided to volunteer with the Relay for Life six years ago.

Together, Brennan and her teammates, along with hundreds of others who have volunteered and become a part of the Relay for Life family in Pottstown, are aiming to raise \$1.1 million to fight cancer this year.