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A Mission-Driven Life

BY KATHY LATOUR

For some people, cancer becomes a motivator.

Last year was bittersweet for Debra Thaler-DeMers, RN, OCN, when she was named the Oncology Certified Nurse of the Year by the Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation shortly before learning she had breast cancer, a second primary cancer for the 25-year survivor of Hodgkin's disease. But, while the diagnosis was difficult, it wasn't a shock for the 50-year-old mother of two who has dealt with cancer her entire life.

In 1980 Thaler-DeMers was working at a law firm during the day while finishing her law degree at night when she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. She had barely recovered when her younger sister Terri was also diagnosed with Hodgkin's at age 22, the fourth family member to be diagnosed with a blood-related cancer.

Thaler-DeMers, pregnant with her first child, traveled back and forth between her home in California and her sister's home in New Jersey, where she cared for Terri during her initial treatments. When treatments failed, Thaler-DeMers moved to Seattle with Terri to be near one of the few hospitals at the time doing bone marrow transplants. Thaler-DeMers learned the sterile techniques for Terri's treatment, which was completed in a sterile room environment. "When I was in the hospital with her, Terri kept telling me how good I was at taking care of her. She said I should get paid for it," says Thaler-DeMers.

Terri died in April of 1986, leaving her sister to mourn and consider her own life choices. "I thought about it while I grieved for my sister," she says. "Then I enrolled in nursing school."

Thaler-DeMers graduated in 1991 and has since become an oncology certified nurse with additional certification in end-of-life care and a special interest in fertility and sexual rehabilitation after cancer—an issue that no one addressed for her. "I feel like having been a patient I can relate to what they are going through and anticipate their needs," she says of her patients at Stanford Cancer Center in San Francisco, where she is an inpatient hematology oncology nurse.



Debra Thaler-DeMers went from law school to nursing school after going through cancer herself and with her late sister. Photo courtesy of Stanford Hospital & Clinics.

“I had planned a career in law and becoming a partner and making money and having a great life. It wasn’t a life geared toward giving something back to society. Oncology nursing is not aimed at financial success but doing something positive for patients and helping them have access to care.” Access issues led Thaler-DeMers to become active in the formation of the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, where she served on the board for six years.

Never Too Young

When 14-year-old Eli Kahn was 3 he had a puzzling limp and fever. His parents took him to a pediatrician at Johns Hopkins near their Baltimore home, a physician who happened to have a subspecialty in hematology. This led to an early diagnosis of leukemia, says Eli’s mother, Marlene Trestman.

Kahn’s treatment at Johns Hopkins, which included a clinical trial, led to a long-time family commitment to assist the pediatric oncology center with fundraisers and support. So it was logical for Kahn to raise funds for pediatric oncology research at the Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins for the community service aspect of his Bar Mitzvah. He took the idea to his mom who suggested he research ways to raise money that would not involve selling anything or asking people for money. Kahn discovered there was a market for used inkjet and laser cartridges and began asking people to give them to him instead of throwing them away.

“At first people dropped them off at the house and there were only a few and then there was a little story in *The Baltimore Sun* and I figured out that it would be better if there was no middleman,” Kahn says. Soon a few law firms signed on, as did Johns Hopkins. Kahn easily made his goal for his Bar Mitzvah and decided to continue the project.



Leukemia survivor Eli Kahn turned a community service project into a long-term commitment to fund cancer research. Photo by Harry Connolly.

With help from his parents, who are both lawyers, Kahn set up an account with EnviroSmart, the largest recycler of cartridges in the world. This allowed Kahn to send mailers to his clients who then send the cartridges directly to EnviroSmart, which then sends a check to Kahn.

“Every cent goes to Johns Hopkins,” says Kahn. “We endorse the checks right over to them, and if someone wants to make a cash donation, we tell them to make the check out to Johns Hopkins.” Since beginning his project, Kahn has donated more than \$23,000 to research. To become part of Kahn’s project, go to www.cartridgesforacure.com and sign up for free mailers to send in your cartridges.

For Her Daughter

Glenna Biehler had always taken care of herself. She did monthly breast self-exams and was a mother to two sons before becoming pregnant with her daughter, Molly.

“I noticed after she was born that there was a lump in my breast, and I realized that during pregnancy I had not checked my breasts. It was like somehow it wasn’t an issue then and no one said to be sure and continue self-exams during that time,” says Biehler.

The lump turned out to be malignant and when Molly was only a few months old, Biehler began treatment for breast cancer. “I couldn’t sleep and spent a lot of time asking, ‘why me.’ What was I supposed to do with this information? I was really mad that with all the posters in the obstetrician’s office, none focused on breast issues during pregnancy,” she says.

What came to Biehler was a poster for doctors’ offices and other places that informs women that they need to stay vigilant during pregnancy and nursing with regular breast self-exams. She called a friend who was a photographer to take the picture and another to design the poster. Today the poster of Glenna and Molly hangs in a number of doctors’ offices in and near Westminster, Colorado.

Biehler sells the poster for \$30 and makes no profit. All proceeds above the cost of the poster and shipping are donated to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. Biehler is looking for an organization that will help produce and circulate the posters to a national audience. To buy a poster, e-mail Biehler at glennabiehler@msn.com.



Glenna Biehler created a poster to educate women about breast health during pregnancy. Photo courtesy of Glenna Biehler.

A Life Remembered

Joyce O’Shaughnessy, MD, co-chair of breast cancer research at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas, was 14 when her 5-year-old sister Teri was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia. The next five years were difficult for the O’Shaughnessy family as Joyce’s mother drove multiple times a week from their home outside Boston to Boston Children’s Hospital, where Teri received treatment for her cancer.

“Teri died in 1975 at age 10,” recalls O’Shaughnessy in an article about her early commitment to cancer research. “Afterward, the years were tough with grief, but fortunately we emerged from it a very close family.”

O’Shaughnessy personally came through the experience with a career path that included medical school and a burning desire to do cancer research. While attending College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, she worked in the summers for the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology, focusing her senior year on research on leukemia cells using what was then a new piece of equipment, the electron microscope.

She graduated following a year of independent cancer research with a top

fellowship and moved on to Yale University School of Medicine, where she continued cancer research. “Although my initial cancer research interest was leukemia, I switched my research focus to breast cancer in 1988 because of an opportunity that presented itself at the National Cancer Institute after I completed my fellowship,” she says.

O’Shaughnessy says she’s still interested in understanding what therapeutic and biologic lessons have been learned in leukemia that might also be applicable in breast cancer. “Teri’s battle and my family’s battle with leukemia instilled a very keen desire to understand malignancy and to overcome it. Even more than the emotional aspects of losing my sister to cancer, the frustration of not being able to cure all my patients who have breast cancer coupled with the fascinating challenge of categorizing the biologic patterns of breast cancer behavior have been what has sustained my interest in breast cancer research and clinical care.”