

Cancer survivor continues her fight to live

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By Paul Swiech

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When Molly Arnold woke up from surgery in August 2005, she saw a nurse glance at her, then make a phone call.

"I thought 'What's going on?'" recalled Molly, 46, of Normal.

Moments later, her husband, Scott, was at her side.

"Honey," Scott said, "it's everywhere. It's in your bones."

"What is?" Molly asked.

"The cancer."

Molly began to cry.

"The doctor came in and I said, 'I don't understand this. I did everything they told me to do,'" said Molly, who already had fought -- and thought she defeated -- breast cancer.

"And he said, 'You're so fortunate because if we didn't do a bone scan, we wouldn't have known and you would have been dead in less than six months.'"

Even so, Molly found out that her life expectancy was less than two years.

The good news is -- nearly three years later -- Molly is still alive and remains active as a wife, mother and director of admissions at Illinois State University, Normal.

Her oncologist, Dr. John Migas of Mid Illinois Hematology & Oncology Associates in Normal, said Molly is still alive because of the success of a relatively new surgery, chemotherapy, a bone-hardening medicine and her positive attitude.

"It's Molly's attitude and the multi-prong treatments that are keeping her going," Migas said. "Her most recent scan showed a regression of disease, which is phenomenal. We've stabilized her disease and it's unbelievable how active she is. She's a dynamo."

Molly credits the treatments, support of family and friends and co-workers, prayer and humor with keeping her going. Her participation in the American Cancer Society Relay For Life of McLean County with colleagues, friends and family this weekend is one way she can raise money for research to "pay back" for the research that resulted in the surgeries and treatments that are helping her.

"Screw the statistics," Molly said of averages that still show that she has less than two years of life remaining. "I'm here to live."

Molly and Scott have been married for 21 years and have two children, Bryce, 19, and Haley, 16. Scott has an older daughter, Briana Hazen, 26, who lives in Montgomery, Ala.



Scott and Molly Arnold pose for a picture at Briana Hazen's wedding in May 2007. (For The Pantagraph/MIKE HONEYCUTT)

Molly was an energetic 38-year-old when she found a lump in her right breast while taking a shower.

She saw her doctor two days later. He thought it was a cyst and sent her home.

Several weeks later, the lump remained.

"I learned that doctors will make mistakes. They're human beings. You need to be intrusive as a patient."

A sonogram raised concerns and a follow-up needle biopsy by a surgeon revealed breast cancer.

"The only thing I could think of was 'Oh my God, what am I going to tell the kids?'"

The surgeon recommended a lumpectomy but Molly got a second opinion from a surgeon in Urbana who said the cancer was aggressive and recommended a mastectomy.

"I went into a fix-it mode," Molly recalled.

The surgeon removed the right breast and did breast reconstruction in a surgery at Carle Foundation Hospital in Urbana in May 2001.

The surgery was a success. Molly took chemotherapy, lost her hair and grew it back, and went on maintenance drugs.

Life went on. In July 2003, she was named ISU admissions director and kept busy with her job and family.

In August 2005, Molly elected to have plastic surgery done on her right breast.

"I decided to get (my breasts) even," she said with a smile.

When the plastic surgeon did a physical exam of her right breast, he found a lump. Three weeks later, Molly was in Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis to have the lump removed when she discovered another lump.

She awoke from that surgery to find that the cancer had metastasized to her bones.

"I had no symptoms, except a little pain between my shoulders," she said. "It was a complete shock.

"I went to see Dr. Migas and he said, 'The cancer is everywhere,'" Molly recalled.

Migas said bone metastasis is uncommon.

"We need to get rolling on chemotherapy and to focus on your quality of life," he told Molly. He explained that there is no cure for metastatic breast cancer to the bone and her life expectancy was less than two years.

"It just didn't seem possible," she said.

Scott said, "The kids handled it very well. For me, it was rough. I had lost my job shortly before that and thought 'What's next?'"

Molly went to Barnes to get a second opinion -- which Migas supported -- and was told about a surgery in which doctors would, by laparoscopy, remove her ovaries.

Her cancer was estrogen and progesterin positive. A source of estrogen is the ovaries.

"They said, 'Let's kill the food source'" for the cancer, she said.

Migas said the surgery is a recent trend for younger patients whose breast cancer is estrogen and progesterin

positive. He has referred some of his patients to Barnes and Northwestern Medical Center in Chicago for the procedure.

Molly had the surgery. She also has had chemotherapy, gets blood work and urine tests, takes the bone-hardening intravenous medicine Zometa once a month and gets scanned once every 10 weeks to determine whether there is cancer growth.

Molly remains active but has made compromises.

"There's not a lot I can't do," she said. "But I do it in moderation."

ISU gave her permission to hire an associate admissions director who handles her responsibilities when she can't make it into work.

She can't lift anything more than five pounds, so she needs help with housework and shopping from Scott, Bryce and Haley.

"As that multi-tasking, working mother, I don't keep a to-do list because I would be doomed to failure," she said. "I have to balance optimism with reality."

She and Scott have switched roles. Scott -- once a corporate manager -- now delivers pizza for Avanti's and focuses on the family and helping Molly.

"Being 50, I grew up in an era of the man's place being the breadwinner," Scott said. "The hardest part for me was getting over that stereotype that I should be out doing this or that. But being a caregiver in a family is more responsibility than we men ever gave our wives credit for."

"Around here, it doesn't matter whether you're washing the dishes or cutting the grass. There are no boy/girl roles. We just pull up our boot straps and do what needs to be done."

Molly credits Scott and the children with helping her maintain her sense of humor. They ask her to try their food because she has lost her senses of smell and taste. They accuse her of having "chemo brain" when she forgets something.

She prays a lot, sees a therapist and is on an anti-depressant.

"I have metastatic breast cancer to the bone and have a life expectancy of two years," she said. "So, I'm living on borrowed time."

Scott said, "You can get caught up in the numbers. But those are averages of averages. For me, I think we're all here for a purpose and I don't think hers is done yet."

Migas said, "I'm going to call Molly's prognosis 'undetermined' because she has beaten the survival statistics already. She is doing so well."

Molly is optimistic but knows there are no guarantees.

"I hope someone will look at me (at Relay For Life this weekend) and think 'She's still going, even though the odds are against her.'

"No one knows how much time they have. I know how precious every day is."

New events scheduled for Relay

By Paul Swiech | pswiech@pantagraph.com

The 14th annual American Cancer Society Relay For Life of McLean County will have several new events this weekend at the Normal Community West High School track.

But two women who have played integral roles for the past several years will not be there.

Michelle Arthofer and Deb McConnell, both members of the Relay organizing committee, have died of cancer. Arthofer died on June 5; McConnell died on March 2.

"Those two women were cancer survivors who got involved with Relay and got strength from their involvement," said Anne Powell of Normal. Powell, who is Relay co-chairwoman this year, is a breast cancer survivor.

"It will be different without them this year. We always say that it isn't a Relay event unless we've laughed, cried and learned something. This year, I think there will be more tears. But through the tears, we will remember Deb and Michelle and will smile," Powell said.

"And we will go on (with Relay) because that is what they would have wanted us to do."

Three new events at Relay this year will be:

- Enrollment in the Cancer Prevention Study (CPS)-3 from 4 to 8 p.m. Friday.

The study is for people between 30 and 65 who never have been diagnosed with cancer and are willing to make a long-term commitment to the study. The goal is to better understand the genetic, environmental and lifestyle factors that cause or prevent cancer.

Enrollment in the free study involves reading and signing an informed consent form, completing a brief survey, providing a waist measurement and giving a blood sample, Powell said.

Enrollees will receive a more detailed survey in the mail and, once a year, will be asked to complete a follow-up survey, Powell said.

"We're really excited to be a part of this," she said. "We are the largest Relay in the state and Elmhurst is the second largest and we are the two Relays (in Illinois) where people can enroll in the study."

- A caregivers' lap at 7:30 p.m. Friday.

"We're doing a caregivers' lap because cancer is not something you go through alone," Powell said. "We want to honor (past and present) caregivers and give them a place to grieve and heal."

- A fight back ceremony at 9:30 a.m. Saturday.

"We want people to use their anger (at losing people to cancer) by deciding what they can do personally to fight cancer," Powell said.

People will be asked to fill out pledge cards committing to do things like getting a mammogram at age 35, getting a colonoscopy at age 50, or stopping smoking.

Relay For Life

What: 14th annual American Cancer Society Relay For Life of McLean County

When: Noon Friday to noon Saturday

Where: Normal Community West High School track, 501 N. Parkside Road

Why: To raise money for cancer society research, patient services and public education

How it works: Teams of eight to 15 participants raise money, then walk or run in relay fashion. Some people bring tents and stay overnight.

Special events: 3 p.m. Friday, youth victory lap; 4 to 8 p.m. Friday, cancer prevention study enrollment; 4 to 6 p.m. Friday, survivor dinner; 7 p.m. Friday, survivor victory lap; 7:30 p.m. Friday, caregivers' lap; 9:30 p.m. Friday, luminaria ceremony; 9:30 a.m. Saturday, fight back ceremony.

Goals: \$556,500 raised by 160 teams. More than 1,750 people are expected to walk or run and about twice that number are expected to attend Relay.

Team registration fee: \$125. In addition, teams of eight to 15 people are asked to raise at least \$100 per person. But people coming out for the first time aren't required to make a donation.

To register: Go to www.relayforlifemclean.com, call (309) 688-3488, or come out to Relay and find a committee member wearing a red shirt.

SOURCES: Anne Powell; Relay For Life of McLean County brochure

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