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Cancer Society urges study enrollment

Upper Bucks residents 30-65 are asked to take part in landmark, long-term survey

By Jenna Portnoy

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Ovarian cancer survivor Terrie Pancio believes she had the easy job, submitting to chemotherapy treatments and constant blood work, while her friends and family looked on helplessly.

"It was hard for them," the Hilltown Township resident said last week, 15 years after doctors gave her a year to live. "They had to watch me go through this, but couldn't make it any better."

Now, those touched by cancer can do something to feel empowered.

On Saturday in Quakertown anyone ages 30 to 65 who has not had cancer can register to participate in the third in a series of landmark American Cancer Society studies.

Enrollees will be asked to fill out a questionnaire and give a blood sample from noon to 4 p.m. during a 24-hour charity walk called Relay for Life at Quakertown Memorial Park. Once they return a second survey by mail, they are enrolled and will receive questionnaires every two or three years for as long as 30 years.

"It's a great opportunity because the people who are willing to give up that little bit of time on a Saturday and an hour out of the year for their lifetime could lead us to the results to find a cure or detect cancer early," Pancio said. "The earlier it's detected, the better the chance a survivor will live a long life."

The organization chose the upper Bucks County relay because of how many people in the region participate in fundraisers throughout the year. It's one of two sites in the region hosting enrollment days. (The other is Pottstown in Montgomery County on June 5.)

"We're not a wealthy community. It's just that people are committed to volunteer organizations," said Jill Wooden, a co-chairwoman of the enrollment part of the event, along with her daughter Whitney. "Really it's a testament to the people of Upper Bucks. With their continued support, our relay is high up on the list. It's an honor."

The American Cancer Society wants to enroll 500,000 people by the end of 2013, said Alpa V. Patel, director of the Cancer Prevention Study-3. The first study in the series, launched in the 1950s, helped provide evidence that smoking causes cancer. In post- World War II America, the news was monumental, she said.

The CPS-3 study is unique because this will be the first time the Cancer Society takes a blood sample at the time of registration, Patel said. The tactic ensures a high participation rate and should make the "bio bank study" the largest of its type in the United States, she said.

The study will focus on lifestyle, genetics and environment.

For example, she said, far more Americans take medication for high cholesterol and high blood pressure, but controlled clinical trials primarily study only the drugs effectiveness. The cancer study will try to determine if these medications can prevent certain types of cancer, she said. The study will also look at how obesity affects cancer rates, Patel said.

At 27, Pancio was only in her second year of teaching in the Hatboro-Horsham School District when a doctor told her she had Stage 3 ovarian cancer. Dubbed the "silent killer," the disease often goes undiagnosed because many of its symptoms -- loss of appetite and abdominal pressure among others -- seem too common to cause alarm.

"Cancer would not have made my Top 100 list of things that would have happened to me," she said, a fluffy white Lhasa apso named Kai sitting in her lap. "My gut told me, 'I'm just going to be in that 1 percent that makes it.'"

Pancio found the good -- and even humor -- in her cancer. Her sister, a doctor, recommended visualization techniques.

"I had to be realistic that I might not make it, but I didn't let that dominate my world," she said. "I looked at chemo as my friend. Without the chemo I'd be dead. And I'm a child of the '80s, so I pictured PAC-MAN eating up the cancer."

The cancer has changed Pancio for the better, she said. Now 42, she's still competitive, but small things tend to bother her less and her priorities are in order. She also shares her experience with newly diagnosed cancer patients through the American Cancer Society.

"In my talks, I ask people, 'What are you going to do to make cancer a word only heard in the history books?'" Pancio said. "Well, this is something they can do to make that a reality."

For more information, go to http://www.relayforlife.org/paupperbucks .

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