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EDITOR'S PICK

Public Health: A cancer story – warrior for public health

AMBER JOHNSON

Oct 28, 2023

“You are not your scars.” – Malisa Morris, breast cancer survivor

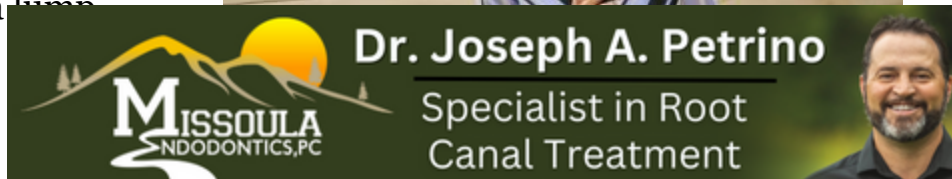
After a double mastectomy, four rounds of chemotherapy, and seven years of hormone therapy, Drenda Niemann was ready to move beyond cancer. So to celebrate her victory over breast cancer, on her birthday in 2021, she made an appointment with a local tattoo artist in Helena. Her chest is now adorned with a wall of proud and colorful peacock feathers – a symbol of beauty and new beginnings.

“I was in my late thirties when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was September 2014,” Niemann remembers. “I wasn’t at the age yet where you would typically get a mammogram, but I noticed a lump



Amber Johnson

Photo provided



high up in my chest bone area during a self-exam and decided to have it checked.”

Lewis and Clark County Public Health Officer Drenda Niemann was named Helena YWCA's Woman of the Year for 2020.

THOM BRIDGE, Independent Record

Diagnosis. Breast cancer. Four tumors.

Stage 1. It was go time. Niemann had her first of two surgeries in October 2014.

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“It’s important to stress the importance of early detection,” says Melissa Baker, Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening Program coordinator for Lewis and Clark Public Health.

“Staying up to date with mammograms allows breast cancer to be caught at the earliest stages when it is most treatable and may require less invasive and less expensive treatments. When caught in early stages, breast cancer has a 99% survival rate for five years,” Baker reports.

Fortunately for Niemann, her cancer was detected, diagnosed and treated quickly. But treatment options weren’t as easy as she hoped for. A rare genetic mutation was identified which caused complications with treatment options. There was no clear path forward. After countless doctors’ appointments, second opinions, and loads of research, Niemann’s many doctors were finally able to agree on a course of treatment.

With two little boys counting on her at home and an army of friends, family, colleagues and fellow National Guard airmen standing by her side, it was time to fight.

“They put me into medically induced menopause.” Niemann says “My cancer was feeding on my hormones, so they had to shut my ovaries off, and they did that with oral medication and injections every three months for seven years.”

A woman of faith, Niemann prayed a lot. Her family prayed a lot. She reached out to a Jin Shin Jyutsu practitioner who taught her meditation, mindfulness and energy work.

“I took a mind/body/spirit approach to beating cancer, a nice complement to Western medicine,” says Niemann. “I chose to incorporate some holistic healing techniques to reduce stress, deal with the symptoms of chemo, and give my body the best opportunity to heal. Chemo kills the cancer cells, but it kills your good cells too. I pieced lots of things together to fight the cancer and survive the treatments.”

Thankfully, Niemann and her boys had an enormous amount of support from family and friends. But it still wasn’t easy.

“It was scary for my kids, especially when I started losing my hair or when I was really sick after chemotherapy treatments. Surgeries are scary. We had to do a lot of reassuring. I told my boys that I trusted the medicine and that the medicine was going to help me get better.”

And the medicine did work. After seven years of treatment, Niemann was released from treatment and declared cancer free in 2021.

“When you face death like that, it changes your perspective on life,” says Niemann. “You reprioritize things. You must make the best of every day that you’re here. I try every day to be very grateful and thankful that I was given another day.”

Both Niemann and Baker recommend that women get regular mammograms starting at age 40. For women with a family history of breast cancer, screenings may be recommended earlier by a physician.

According to Baker, the Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening Program of Lewis and Clark Public Health provides payment for breast and cervical cancer screening and diagnostic tests for women who meet certain age and income guidelines and who are uninsured or underinsured.

“Once enrolled in the program, women can choose where they get their mammogram done and see any provider they want for their breast exam and mammogram referral,” says Baker.

Women who are enrolled in the program and are diagnosed with cancer can then qualify for a special Montana Medicaid program that will cover treatment. But they must be enrolled in the program at the time of diagnosis.

“One in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime,” Baker says. “Early detection saves lives, so don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.”

To determine your eligibility for the Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening Program at LCPH, please contact Melissa Baker at 406-457-8923.

“When you’re faced with cancer, take a holistic approach,” recommends Niemann. “Think about what you are putting in and on your body. Clean up your environment. Clean up your diet. Move your body; sweat. Trust Western medicine but incorporate mindful and spiritual practices that round it out. And once you’ve beat cancer, live your life to the fullest!”

Monday, Oct. 16, was Boss’s Day. And we’d like to acknowledge our wonderful boss, LCPH Health Officer Drenda Niemann.

As staff at LCPH, we have profound respect, love and admiration for our kind and courageous leader. She has devoted her life to protect and defend her country and her people - even when it wasn't popular. She truly embodies Teddy Roosevelt's "The Man in the Arena."

What some of you might not know is that our Health Officer, Drenda Niemann, is also an officer in the Montana Air National Guard and has been for the last 17 years, currently serving as a medical administrator supporting the health of airmen in our state.

A breast cancer survivor, veteran and mother of two boys, she is a warrior in many ways that go unseen and unrecognized. To know Drenda is to love and respect her. We are grateful for her leadership.

Amber Johnson is the communications specialist for Lewis and Clark Public Health.

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