

THE POWER OF INTEGRATED CARE

By Michelle F. Solomon



“Our patients meet with the surgeon, and this is the same surgeon that follows them through the whole procedure.”

For Kathy Connell, it literally took just five minutes to save her life. While doing a routine self breast examination in the shower a few years ago, she felt a lump. “It was on my right side. If I lifted my arm, I could feel the tumor; but when it was against my body I couldn’t feel it,” says Kathy.

The Coral Springs mother of two recalls that she had felt a cyst in her breast about three years before. “I knew that this tumor was different because it felt different,” she explains.

In June 2003, Kathy was diagnosed with Stage 1 invasive breast cancer. She was 38 years old at the time and had no history of it in her family. She describes her diagnosis as “a fluke.” For Kathy, an expected flood of emotions overtook her. “To say that the rug was pulled out from under me is an understatement.” She immediately worried about her two young daughters, Megan and Marisa. She was concerned about her husband, Ken. She wondered if she would lose her breast. Her life was about to change.

A Supportive Staff

Mark Shachner, M.D., the medical director of the Coral Springs Medical Center Women’s Diagnostic and Wellness Center, diagnosed Kathy’s cancer. She said as soon as she stepped through the doors of the beautiful, home-like center, she knew she wasn’t going to go through her illness alone. “About four days before my surgery I had to have some tests done. They had to inject me with something so that the surgeon could see if there was any lymph node involvement. I was terrified. A woman also named Kathy, a technician there, said to me, ‘I realize this is very emotional. We’re not going to rush you through this.’” Kathy breathed deeply. “It made all the difference in the world,” she says. Kathy also remembers a radiologist, although she can’t recall his name, and how he took an interest in her. “He took the time to talk to me and ask me about my life,” recalls Kathy.

Four days after her tests, it was time for her lumpectomy. One of the nurses who prepped her for surgery said, “I see so many women who come through here. They do OK. They do fine. You are going to be OK.” Kathy says she’s never forgotten what that nurse said, the pleasant way she said it and what she looked like. “If I saw her today, I’d remember her,” she says.

But it was the physician from the Women’s Diagnostic and Wellness Center, Bernard Zaragoza, M.D., who would perform her surgery, that said the words that would take her from being a frightened bystander to being an active participant in her well-being. “He put his arm around me. He said, ‘You did everything right. You educated yourself. You did your exam. You didn’t wait. You are a healthy young woman and you’re going to come through this, but I need your help. Your attitude is going to determine 90 percent of



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your outcome. I can’t do it myself; you need to help me,” Kathy recalls him saying. His voice was stern, but soothing and calming, and he was straightforward in his directions to her, which were: “If you’re going to believe that this is going to make you sicker, it will. If you believe that you are going to be OK and be an active part of your recovery, you will be well.”

Kathy remembers how she felt after he spoke. “You’re so helpless at that point, yet he was telling me I wasn’t helpless. It struck me, and I believed it 100 percent,” she says.

A Happy Ending

Dr. Zaragoza told Kathy that he wasn’t sure if the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes. He also warned her that if another lump was found during the surgery and if it was deep, they would have to

remove her breast. “I remember waking up after my surgery and the first thing I saw was my husband Ken’s face and I looked into his eyes and he said to me, ‘You still have your breast.’” Kathy also learned that the cancer had not spread to her lymph nodes. She underwent chemotherapy and recently hit her five-year mark of being cancer-free. Kathy, now 43, goes to the Women’s Diagnostic and Wellness Center every year to have her annual mammogram and also volunteers at the Center once a month on behalf of the American Cancer Society’s Look Good, Feel Better program. “It’s a wonderful, little community there,” she says.

One-Stop Shop for Women’s Health

Dr. Shachner, who has been involved with the women’s center from the beginning “about 7 or 8 years ago,” said it is really important

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to Coral Springs Medical Center to have a place that helps support women's health. "We have the best-quality breast-dedicated machinery. We are one of the few hospitals that have a dedicated breast radiologist to read the mammograms. Therefore, patients can get their answers much quicker." He commented on Kathy's experience, saying that the center prides itself on its patient care, and the importance of a cancer patient to be in a comfortable environment, including their interaction with the staff.

"It's good for patients to be limited in the number of people they are exposed to. Many places will send a client to a surgeon. Here, our patients meet with the surgeon, and they are the same surgeon that follows them through the whole procedure," he explains. Support groups that help women are also an integral part of the Women's Diagnostic and Wellness Center. There's also the Enlightened Women's Club, a membership program for women with or without breast cancer. They receive discounts from local merchants and in the hospital's gift shop and cafeteria, plus free physician referrals, health lectures, support groups, a newsletter and discounts for healthy lifestyle wellness classes.

The Women's Diagnostic and Wellness Center will soon have a new home across the street from the hospital. "We have grown so much we need a bigger space," explains Dr. Shachner. However, the doctor still promises that women will have the same experience and high standard of care at the new facility. "With a bigger space, we hope to expand our services and make it a one-stop shop for women's health," he says.

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Gynecology and Women's Health

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