

DEBRA PADAZOPOULOS - 2000 HONORARY SURVIVOR CHAIR

A Bond Against Breast Cancer

Race for a cure, race for a cause.

It has become Debra Padazopoulos' favorite day of the year - the day she dons a pink survivor's cap, hugs her family extra hard and joins more than 10,000 Quad-Citians in a race against breast cancer. It's the day of the annual Komen Quad Cities Race for the Cure® - a day to celebrate life.

On this day, she thinks back to four years ago when she discovered the lump in her breast. She remembers the whirlwind that followed -- the ultrasound, the mammogram, the diagnosis, the surgery, the one cancerous lymph node out of 14, the four rounds of chemotherapy, the seven weeks of radiation, the loss of her long hair, the cards and letters and the amazing watershed of support. She remembers fearing that her young sons would be left without a mother to raise them.

Then, she is uplifted by the support of so many runners and walkers, many who make the emotional trek to celebrate or commemorate a loved one touched by the disease.

"Race day is better than my birthday," says 39-year-old Padazopoulos of Davenport, who was last year's Honorary Survivor Chair for the race. "Usually, I'm more of a giver, but on this day I revel. It's my day to celebrate survivorship. I wouldn't miss it for the world because it's so inspiring."

On Saturday, June 9, she will join family and friends and support the 12th annual race. Sponsored locally by Genesis Medical Center and KWQC-TV-6, the race is one of more than 100 across the country. In 11 years, the local event has raised \$1.5 million and provided more than 2,000 mammogram vouchers to needy Quad City-area women.

Since her diagnosis, life has become more precious for Padazopoulos. Breast cancer has taught her and her husband, Dionysios, to relish even the smallest, simplest pleasures.

For example, she remembers that first Christmas with breast cancer, when she sat in new pajamas wearing a Santa hat on her head while her sons, Fotios and Stavros, romped in the snow.

"I was bald as a cucumber, but I kept thinking 'Life doesn't get any better than this,' " she says, adding that she has made it her mission to let women know there is hope in triumphing over the disease. "You hear all the clichés, and it may sound corny, but breast cancer has really been a blessing to us. We really do live life instead of just exist."

She compliments the nurses and doctors at the Center for Breast Health at Genesis Medical Center, where she received her care and found a support network of other breast cancer survivors. "God just put all the right people in my path," she says.