

WHITNEY CORRIGAN - 2004 HONORARY SURVIVOR CHAIR

Whitney Corrigan never forgets the date – June 6, 2000.

Before that day, she was a 38-year-old mother and wife with no family history of breast cancer. She'd had a clean bill of health from an annual check-up just three months earlier and no reason at her age to think about mammograms or her mortality. Then she discovered the lump on her breast.

"When the doctor flipped the mammogram films up to the light, you could see it," she says. "There was no question it was breast cancer. I'll never ever forget that day."

Five days later, she would do what she had done for the past 10 years – volunteer at the Komen Quad Cities Race for the Cure®. In the midst of helping plan a race that raises money to fight and promote awareness of breast cancer, she faced a mighty personal fight of her own.

Her diagnosis brought new meaning to the Race. Since 1990, she had been actively involved in the event as a leader in Junior League of the Quad Cities, which brought the race to the area with the help of Genesis Medical Center. The event, in its 15th year, is now sponsored by Genesis and KWQC-TV.

This millennium race would be filled with irony, painful realization and a few more lumps in the throat for Mrs. Corrigan. "I knew my diagnosis wasn't good," she says. "I knew the tumor was fairly large, and that there could be lymph node involvement. I would have no choice but to have a mastectomy. Seeing all those survivors wearing pink shirts made me see I wasn't alone. You think, "Oh, Thank God there are so many pink shirts.""

Honorary survivor

Today, cancer-free and exuberant about life with her 5-year-old son, Zachary, and her husband, Dr. Gregg Corrigan, D.P.M., she still volunteers and still keeps her positive attitude as this year's Honorary Survivor Chair. She invites Quad City-area residents to join her and other courageous breast cancer survivors at the Komen Quad Cities Race for the Cure®.

In their battle to beat breast cancer, every survivor achieves great milestones and has an amazing story to tell, she says. In her case, she had two cancerous tumors and 18 cancerous lymph nodes. To complicate matters, her tumors were hormone negative – meaning they were not receptive to drugs like Tamoxifen that inhibit hormone production. After traveling to the nationally renowned cancer center M.D. Anderson in Houston for a consultation, she chose the aggressive treatment regimen close to home at Genesis Medical Center in Davenport.

The trials of treatment

"I remember losing all my hair –even my eyelashes and eyebrows – from the chemotherapy," she recalls. "The wig I wore that summer was beastly hot, so I wore a baseball cap a lot. One day, my son said, 'Mommy, would you please put your head back on!' He didn't say 'hair.' He said 'head.'"

Medication controlled the nausea and vomiting, and she didn't get sick once, she says. However the extensive fatigue and the severe joint, hip and back pain from the drug Taxol was more difficult. "For me, getting through the treatments was easy," she says. "The hard part has been living with the thought

that this could come back. Down in Houston, they told me this had a 63 percent chance of coming back in 1 to 5 years."

After successfully completing chemotherapy and radiation treatments, she and her husband ran the 5K Race in 2001, the first time in the local race's history that men and women could run together. In support, her friends wore green hats that said, "Hats off to Whitney!"

That tremendous support of friends, family and health professionals at Genesis' Center for Breast Health and Cancer Center helped her maintain a positive attitude in the face of grueling treatments for her very aggressive breast cancer. Today, that support has made her an advocate for self-breast exams, mammograms and for all women to take charge of their health. "Don't ever assume that because you're young or because you have no family history that you are safe," she says.

Now, she sees the sea of pink survivor shirts at Race and thinks, "Wow, I'm one of them!" she says. "There are times when it's very hard," she admits. "You worry and think 'Did the treatments get all the cancer?' But you've got to keep the positive attitude. For me, Race is a goal every year. If I can do this every year, then I'm OK."

Article courtesy of Genesis Health System; by Linda Barlow, Communications Coordinator