

## **Routine Mammogram Made the Difference**

Virgie Hughes, age 62, owes her life to a mammogram. It detected the beginnings of her breast cancer and also marked the beginning of Virgie's mission to impress upon women the importance of getting regular mammograms.

Getting a mammogram was part of Virgie's routine every year. "I've always felt we should do what we can to keep our bodies healthy. I'm not a health nut – far from it, in fact – but I was able to get regular mammograms and saw it as part of my responsibility to take care of my health."

Early detection is one of the major keys in fighting cancer. "The earlier it's detected, the better the outcome," said Jason Ramm, MD, family medicine physician and medical staff member of West Calcasieu Cameron Hospital. "But, we can't detect it without screenings and consistent doctor's visits. Ms. Hughes has the right outlook: the patient has a responsibility for their own health to see their doctor, get screened and live a healthy lifestyle. In fact, lifestyle factors affect about 2/3 of all cancers detected. By exercising regularly, eating healthy and getting regular screenings, we could greatly reduce the number of cancers diagnosed. We actually have more control over cancer than most people realize."

Her annual mammogram in the fall of 2007 showed something unusual. The subsequent MRI showed the mass was deep inside her left breast tissue; surgery was recommended. "During this time when I was grasping with the idea that I might have cancer, it helped to know that I'd had regular mammograms. I knew that if it turned out to be cancer, it wasn't there the year before," she said. "It was detected early and that's what made the difference for me."

She said this was one of the hardest periods in her life. "Throughout the uncertainty, the follow up testing and doctor's visits, I had an underlying measure of peace," she said. "I felt confident in the care I was receiving."

Surgery was scheduled for October 30. It was to be a lumpectomy, where the tumor and some surrounding tissue are removed. "But, I told my doctor that if, during the surgery, it would be better to remove the entire breast then go ahead. It's better to lose a breast than lose my life," she said.

The lumpectomy was successful. The next challenge facing Virgie was 6 weeks of chemotherapy. "It was once a week and yes, I lost my hair; but other than that, I had no major side effects other than being very tired. Eating was more of a challenge, not because I was sick, but because everything had a metallic taste. Except," she said with a smile, "ice cream and cream pies! Those tasted wonderful and I indulged often."

Virgie's last day of chemo was also her 42<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary. "We celebrated the day in the doctor's office," she said, "but that was okay."

Radiation treatment was next. Wrapping up her treatment was a full body scan after radiation. "It showed no sign of cancer cells," Virgie said. "That was the best news I'd heard in a long time."

Virgie says one of the most comforting things to her throughout the experience is that she'd had those regular mammograms for years. "When I would have the inevitable times of doubt, I would remind myself that I'd had those screenings; that this cancer was new, it hadn't spread, and that gave me great odds for a complete recovery. I am so glad I made myself get those mammograms every year. It requires effort, but isn't our health worth it? If you don't have good health, you're missing so much out of life. I know."

She also knows what's it's like to be on the other side of the diagnosis. The year before Virgie's cancer was diagnosed, her husband, Ronald, had heart surgery. "That experience was harder than my cancer treatment," she said. "It was difficult to watch him and not be able to do much to help. During my own treatment, I felt more in control."

That sense of control seems elusive to some people who mistakenly believe that people in Southwest Louisiana have a higher chance of getting cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, one in three people will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime, regardless of where they live. Cancer rates in Southwest Louisiana are the same as the national average.

Virgie finds that she pays more attention to eating healthy foods and tries to exercise each day. Her motivation is her one-year-old grandson, Jack, and says she wants to be there for his milestones and to see him graduate. "Plus, I have a lot of living yet to do," she said with a wink. "I'm not ready to leave my husband, he still needs me!" She paused and said, "It's been a difficult few years, but I know other women have gone through more radical surgery than I had to. My story isn't as dramatic as other stories, but what matters to me is for women to hear the message repeated over and over: get a mammogram. It's important; it's our responsibility to do everything we can to protect our health. That includes regular doctor visits, following the recommended screenings, eating healthy and getting exercise. It all works together and gives the best foundation possible for good health. It matters and I am living proof."

"Today's advances in medicine and treatment of cancer give people more hope than ever before, but we have to begin fighting early," said Dr. Ramm. The American Cancer Society recommends women get annual mammograms at the age of 40; reports show that over 182,000 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed annually. At this time, there are about 2.5 million breast cancer survivors in the United States.

West Calcasieu Cameron Hospital is one of the area sponsors of the Fight Cancer with Facts educational campaign.