

Breast cancer survivor: Annual mammogram saved her life

For a while I was embarrassed of my diagnosis. I blamed myself and my lifestyle. In all honesty, I fit the bill because of my weight and habits; happily there was no known family history. The embarrassment lasted all of a day.



VIEWPOINT
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I had put it off for almost a year — busy with work, family activities, no time in my schedule. An invitation from my medical plan for an annual assessment of preventive care put me back on track, and I am ever so grateful for that reminder.

In February 2006, I went in for my annual mammogram. A few weeks later, a form arrived in the mail noting that the results showed two suspicious areas that needed additional views, followed by biopsies and the word you fear: **CANCER.**

I remember the doctor going over the details, drawing the diagram and zooming in on the area, and what the surgery would entail. "It's stage I breast cancer. . . . it's early . . . it's one centimeter." The information is flowing, the required literature is handed out and the fog continues to build. After shedding a few tears with my husband and informing my family and co-workers, I started asking "why?"

That evening a friend and medical professional came to mind. An unannounced visit to his office at Maui Memorial Medical Center was in order for the next day. I told him my di-

agnosis and his response was positive: "It's early, it's curable, you're lucky." He pulled out an independent Maui County study relating to breast cancer that he conducted with another physician. The numbers are staggering — most women diagnosed with cancer in our own county are already at stage IV, in their late 50s to early 60s, needing to undergo radical surgeries, radiation and chemotherapy. My first response again was, "why?" "Why aren't women getting their annual mammograms starting at age 40 as recommended by the American Cancer Society?" The earlier the cancer is found, the better.

After a lumpectomy in May 2006 and six-and-a-half weeks of radiation treatment, the facts from the study continued to bother me. I checked various Web sites, read newspaper articles, spoke with local clinicians, fellow breast cancer patients and survivors, looking for answers. For some, it was a matter of making time and having no family history. For others, it was a matter of not having insurance. For the majority, it was the fear of being one of the statistics.

The American Cancer Society estimates "there are 2 million women living in the United States who have been treated for breast cancer; by the end of 2007, 178,480 new cases will be diagnosed and 40,460 women will die from the disease." In Hawaii, it is the most common cancer among women, accounting for one third of all cases and over 15 percent of all cancer-related deaths.

An early breast cancer detection plan should include monthly breast self-examinations beginning at age 20; clinical breast examination every three years from ages 20 to 29; baseline mammogram by age 40 with screening every

one to two years until age 50 at which time it should be annual. A good diet, exercise, quitting smoking and drinking are lifestyle changes that can help.

My purpose became clear — a grass-roots effort is needed to educate the women of Maui County and the state on the value of annual mammograms and how *early detection* is key to survival. And one should not to limit that reminder to the 31 days in October (National Breast Cancer Awareness Month) but every day for an entire year.

Through Roselani's Aloha Cherry Truffle Ice Cream and the Maui Memorial Medical Center Foundation, we have established an education and awareness campaign to get that message out. A simple diagnostic test can save your life. By partnering with local restaurants and establishments serving Roselani's 75th anniversary flavor, we've begun. In addition, we will feature this flavor in a retail package to be released during the holidays to establish an ongoing education campaign and present the message that early detection is key to survival.

Maui Memorial Medical Center Foundation will also conduct free cancer screenings for breast as well as prostate and skin cancer on Oct. 20 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at MMMC in the Wailuku Tower. Aloha Cherry Truffle (A.C.T.) samples will be served as we A.C.T. sweet now to beat breast cancer in our community.

■ *Catherine Nobriga Kim is vice president of the Roselani Ice Cream Division of Maui Soda & Ice Works Ltd. The third-generation ice cream maker is a wife, mother of three and a breast cancer survivor.*