

# Pregnant with Cancer

## Breast cancer survivor founds national support network

by AMY TEFFT

October is National Breast Health Awareness Month and to kick off the occasion Catholic Health Systems is teaming up with Expressly for Women at Sisters Hospital to urge women to put their fears aside and get tested for breast cancer.

In an educational crusade, the centers are joining forces and offering free mammograms and information about advances in the fight against the deadly disease that touches the lives of one in eight women.

Each year, the National Cancer Society estimates some 175,000 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer and that diagnosis will change the path of the woman's life forever.

Snyder resident Patty Murray is one of the women who make up the statistic.

"It was around this time in 1996; I was out in my garden pulling weeds and I started to feel very sore, so I took a bath. I just thought I overdid it since I was about 4 months pregnant at the time," said Murray. "That's when I found the lump."

● The Amherst Town Board declared Friday, Oct. 15 Mammography Day to coincide with National Mammography Day. Women are encouraged to sign up, receive and make a commitment to get a mammogram.

● On Sunday, Oct. 3 the American Cancer Society raised \$175,000 locally through its fourth annual Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Walk. Donations are still welcome and may be made to: Making Strides Against Breast Cancer, 101 John James Audubon Parkway, Amherst, NY 14228.

Since the family was leaving for a vacation to Disney World the next day, Murray decided not to mention it to her family.

"I had an appointment scheduled for the day after I came back from Florida. While we were there it kept bothering me so I eventually told my husband I had found a lump. He told me not to worry about it that it was probably from the pregnancy, so I just kept trying to put it out of my mind."

When the family returned, Murray visited her doctor and was told there wasn't anything to be worried about.

"I saw a nurse practitioner who was concerned but thought I should see the doctor just to be certain. After the doctor examined the lump, she decided I should have it checked out."

With a sinking feeling, Murray scheduled an appointment to see a specialist.

"I just knew something was wrong, I just knew it inside me," she said. "I couldn't get an appointment for two-and-a-half weeks, so I had to wait. The wait was awful. I went through hell wondering what was going on. I guess it was my fault to an extent, I should have demanded an earlier appointment," she said. "Women cannot be passive about this."

Murray also grew increasingly worried about her pregnancy.

"I had five miscarriages before this pregnancy," she said. "I was so worried the same thing would happen with this one. I couldn't wait to get to that appointment."

On the day of her appointment, Murray and her husband drove to a Rochester facility for an exam.

After receiving a mammogram, several x-rays and sonogram, Murray was starting to breathe easier.

"They all looked normal. The techs couldn't really see anything because it was so deep.



Snyder resident and founder of the support group "Pregnant with Cancer," **Patty Murray** looks on shortly after the birth of her son Patrick with dark bruises from chemotherapy drugs streaking down her arm. Murray was diagnosed with breast cancer when she was 4 months pregnant.

They did one last test."

The last test was an ultrasound which provided Murray's doctor with an answer.

"They didn't tell me, but I could tell by their faces," she said. "After the sonogram, they had three doctors come in and look at the ultrasound. Then they did a needle biopsy right there on the table. I was terrified."

The biopsy was immediately sent to the lab for testing.

"We sat in the waiting room, just waiting for the results," Murray said. "I couldn't stop crying. My husband was there with me and it wasn't in his mind-set there could actually be something wrong. He kept saying, 'Honey, it's not anything, they're just waiting for all the tests,' and I just kept crying."

After receiving the results, the doctors confirmed it was a malignancy, but were unable to determine the type.

"On Saturday I saw a lot of doctors and over the weekend I had a chest x-ray that showed clear, but being pregnant, they couldn't do a lot of the other scans on me."

On Monday after all the tests were reviewed Murray and her husband saw an oncologist and he confirmed it was breast cancer.

"I was devastated with the news of breast cancer," she said. "My first reaction was I am going to die. I kept relating to the 'It's a Wonderful Life' movie with George Bailey. I kept seeing my life as if it were a movie reel in my head and not a reality. All the way home we both cried."

Left with the reality of cancer, Murray was told to find a surgeon and have the six by

nine centimeter tumor removed.

"We didn't know what to do," she said "We were told to go look in the phone book, so we did."

With no risk factors, Murray began the barrage of emotions that is normal with a diagnosis of cancer.

"With already having two kids that depend on me, I really felt guilty about getting cancer. I kept going over in my head, 'Was it something I ate? Was it something I did and now I'm being punished for it? What do I do to deserve it?' I had no idea."

After the initial shock, Murray decided dying was not an option and began the fight for her life.

"When they did the surgery they found another tumor attached to the larger one which was five by three centimeters."

The two huge tumors were buried deep inside, but had doubled in size in one month.

"Because they were spreading so quickly, they could not wait until my pregnancy was over to start the treatments," Murray said. "They recommended chemotherapy and told me the molecules of the drug were large and could not penetrate placenta so the baby wouldn't get the chemo. I had no choice but to believe them."

On Dec. 12, 1995, five months pregnant, Murray started the chemotherapy treatments that would eventually save her life.

"I started the treatments three days after I had the lumpectomy, and Patrick was born in March with a full head of hair," Murray said with a smile. "My other two were bald, but he had hair. He weighed eight pounds and he

was just beautiful." Less than a week after giving birth, Murray resumed chemotherapy.

Murray won the battle for her life in the middle of October after completing six weeks of radiation treatments.

"People think cancer is never going to affect them. Like we have some sort of control over cancer," she said. "After seven months of treatments, my doctor said to me, 'Patty, you did nothing to cause this cancer.' It was really liberating to realize, 'Hey, I did nothing to cause this.'"

Feeling that liberation, Murray decided to help other women in her same situation and started the "Pregnant with Cancer" support group.

Now a national organization, the telephone support network talks to women who get diagnosed with breast cancer while they are pregnant. The organization is listed with every major cancer center and will be going on-line by the end of next month.

"We need to get more survivor stories out there because when people get diagnosed with this, they have to think about not the people who have died, but the people who have survived."

With the worst behind her, Murray is constantly on guard for signs of recurrence.

"I went through menopause early because of the chemotherapy," she said. "I have to see a medical oncologist, radiation oncologist, have bone scans once a year, chest x-rays and mammograms, pap smears, pelvic sonograms, uterine biopsies and ultrasound every six months along with seeing my regular doctor. People think it's over when it's over and it's not."

With a bright future ahead, Murray is happy to be alive.

Beating the odds, Murray will not become one of nearly 43,300 women expected to die this year from breast cancer. With breast cancer reported to be the leading cause of death in women over 50, the Catholic Health System has scheduled an educational seminar from 8:30 a.m.-noon on Saturday, Oct. 23 in the atrium of the Rich Renaissance.

Pastries, coffee and tea will kick off the seminar titled "A Positive Portrait of Breast Health," followed by educational videos, discussions and updates on advancements in breast cancer treatments.

Local breast specialists Dr. Ronald Bauer and Dr. Claudia Fosket will also discuss preventive medicine and updates in mammography including the new stereotactic core biopsy.

They will also be handing out free gift certificates from Olan Mills Portrait Studios to anyone tested during the month of October at one of the Catholic Health System sites

### Size of Tumors Found by Mammography and Breast Self Exam

Average-size lump found by getting regular mammograms. ●

Average-size lump found by first mammogram. ●

Average-size lump found by women practicing occasional BSE. ●

Average-size lump found by women untrained in BSE. ●