



AMH Physical Therapist Treated ‘Close to Home’

October 1 2013 10:56 AM



It was the worst possible news. At age 39, Sue Heinz, a wife, mom of two busy daughters and a full-time physical therapist at Alton Memorial Hospital, was diagnosed with breast cancer.

“It’s been so surreal. Even today I can’t believe I went through all of this. I feel so great now and am grateful for everyone who was there for me,” Heinz said, crediting her family, friends, co-workers and patients who supported her.

Heinz, who had her first mammogram at 35, was scheduled for a mammogram around her 40th birthday, but a month before she discovered a lump in her armpit.

After seeking care from her doctor, she was later referred to both a surgeon and radiologist. Following a CT scan and the removal of a lymph node for testing, Heinz learned she had breast cancer on Oct. 26, 2012.

Heinz began her treatment with AMH medical oncologist Mark Woodson, MD. Because of the presentation of her disease, she also sought the help of cancer specialists in St. Louis.

“Dr. Woodson immediately had a plan for me to fight this starting with chemotherapy,” Heinz said. “I was confident because he knew what we needed to do.”

Heinz began chemotherapy treatment at Alton Memorial Hospital’s Outpatient Cancer and Infusion Center.

“Sue has been through a lot of treatments to eradicate her disease including chemotherapy, surgeries and radiation,” Dr. Woodson said. “When possible, we always hope our patients can receive care here in their own backyard. Sue has really been a model patient. I’ve been impressed with how she has tried to keep things normal in her life by working and always remaining upbeat.”

Following her chemotherapy, Heinz chose to have a double mastectomy in February, at which time 10 lymph nodes were also removed for testing. She also began working with a plastic and reconstructive surgeon both before and after her radiation treatments.

“This was all such a surprise for me,” Heinz said. “I have an aunt who is a breast cancer survivor, but I have no other family history. I needed to do everything I could to fight this. I didn’t want to have to go through this again. I had the BRCA gene test for cancer because I wanted to know for my own daughters. Thankfully, that test was negative.”

Heinz was only in the hospital for one night following her surgery, but took six weeks off from work to recover and begin radiation treatment under the care of Joel Simmons, MD, medical director of Radiation Oncology at AMH. Heinz concluded her radiation treatments at the AMH Cancer Care Center, where she became one of the first patients to receive radiation treatments using the new TrueBeam linear accelerator after the renovated Cancer Care Center reopened early this summer.

Heinz was able to not only receive cutting-edge treatment using image guidance, but also have the convenience of seeking treatments during her workday over lunch and not having to travel a long distance.

The amount of treatments, time commitment and both physical and emotional effects of cancer treatment can be taxing on patients, Dr. Simmons said. Having state-of-the-art treatment available locally to patients like Heinz has been invaluable.

“Sue was an excellent patient,” Dr. Simmons said. “She was very committed and very in tune to her care. We were able to continue her plan of care, and she did fantastic.”

Since Heinz’s final radiation treatment in June, there have been no signs of her disease. She walked in her first Race for the Cure as a breast cancer survivor and is back to work full time.

Although Heinz has been tested physically and emotionally over the last year, she is grateful for what she has been through and those around her.

“It was all very scary at first,” she said. “But with my health care knowledge, I felt a little more at ease. I was always treated with such empathy and care at Alton Memorial. It was comforting to be here, and I am so proud of where I work. They say the best care is close to home. I believe that, and I got it.”