

Facing the future



Shelby Westbrook

Psychology teacher discusses diagnosis of breast cancer, bilateral mastectomy surgery

The phone rang with news that would change her life. The biopsy results were back, the doctor said. Psychology teacher Dara Frazier had breast cancer.

"I clearly remember getting the phone call from my doctor Thursday, Aug. 16," Frazier said. "I had gone in for mammograms and tests before that, but the message from my doctor was 'I wouldn't worry about this. It's a low percentage of people that get cancer as a diagnosis.' I remember being in the grocery store that Thursday morning when the phone rang. I could tell my doctor was upset to have to tell me."

The doctor had already scheduled appointments with an oncologist and a surgeon. Frazier met with the oncologist the very next day. He told her more about what the lab results included and said he wouldn't be involved in her treatment until after the surgery. Later, Frazier met with her surgeon.

"[The surgeon] said that one breast had to be completely removed," Frazier said. "She said the cancer is not invasive. It had not spread to other places. We had caught it early. It's a stage zero cancer, but there is enough of the cancer in different locations on the left side that it has to be removed. On the right side, it was only in one small location. She said we could do a lumpectomy, where they just take out that part. The problem is then you have to follow up with radiation

treatment, and there's always a chance the cancer could come back."

Frazier decided to have both breasts removed in order to avoid radiation treatment and the risk of the cancer's recurrence.

"The women in my family have all lived to be 80 something or 90 something," she said. "I'm only 50. I thought that was a lot of years to allow the cancer to come back. My doctor, my husband and I made the decision to go with what they call a bilateral mastectomy, where they'll remove both breasts."

Another factor contributing to her decision was the reconstruction of her breasts, which Frazier decided to have done in the same surgery.

"My poor grandmother had breast cancer," Frazier said. "She was 75 when she was diagnosed, and back in 1975, they didn't even talk about reconstruction. That was probably [because] mainly male doctors did not see that as an issue. I'm very thankful that here in the 21st century it is assumed you

will have reconstruction. Insurance pays for it, along with the removal surgery. There's been a shift in the thinking of our society, so I'm thankful for that."

Frazier missed the first day of school to meet with her reconstruction surgeon.

"On the second day of school, my first day with the kids, I told them

[about my breast cancer] because I wanted them to know that I was expecting to be out for about a month of school," she said. "If you don't want to take this class for a semester because you don't like the idea of having a sub for a month, you can get a schedule change. That does not hurt my feelings. That does not bother me. I felt like it was fair for them to know that going in."

As she had had a major surgery once before, Frazier wasn't very nervous going into it.

"I had a tumor taken out of my chest when I was 21," Frazier said. "It was not malignant; it was not cancer, but it still had to come out. I know what to expect as far as going to the hospital for major surgery. I know I'll be sore. I know it'll be important to stay on the pain medications. I know I'll be in the hospital for three or four days. I'll go home, and I know I won't be able to lift things or raise my arms above my head or drive for a while. I have plenty of people who are offering to help. People have been so supportive and so nice."

Frazier's last day at school before her surgery was Oct. 1. She spent Oct. 2 having pre-surgical procedures. Oct. 3 was the day of her surgery. Austin Community College Psychology professor Kathy Statos took over her classes while she was gone.

"I was [nervous about leaving my classes] until I found a wonderful sub," Frazier said. "Statos has also done some subbing at Lake Travis, so she has high school subbing experience, and she teaches Psychology at the college level, so I feel good about leaving things in her hands."

The surgery successfully took place Oct. 3.

"My surgery went well and as expected," she said. "It took about nine hours. I remember getting a shot to relax me and the nothing until waking in recovery about 7 p.m. My throat was sore from the trach tube but no pain — lots of painkillers."

After the surgery, she had two tubes coming out from under her arms and two more coming out of either side of her abdomen to drain excess fluid. She was bruised and swollen and unable to stand or walk for more than a few minutes. She even had trouble washing her hair. The support she received from others helped her overcome the obstacles.

"I'm a person of faith," Frazier said. "I know my entire church, my entire extended family, my circle of friends, just about all those people are praying, and that makes a difference to me."

Having breast cancer has made Frazier reevaluate the way she lives her life. She has started trying to eat food, especially animal products, without added hormones.

"My cancer cells are hormone receptive, meaning estrogen and progesterone, the female hormones, make it grow," she said. "It makes me think about hormones in our food. I am a meat eater; I am a milk drinker, but I have been more careful about buying milk and buying meat that is raised without hormones from now on. Of course I wasn't careful about that, growing up in the '60s and '70s and '80s. It didn't occur to us that it would ever be a problem. It's probably a good thing to be aware of artificial hormones that we don't really need in our diets."

Frazier recommends that people do what they can to avoid cancer, including boosting the immune system and avoiding alcohol and drugs.

"My doctor says there is research showing we all get cancer, maybe five or six times in our life, but our immune system is able to overpower it," Frazier said. "His opinion is that cancer is probably a failure of the immune system. He is a believer in bumping up the immune system as much as you can, eating healthy and taking certain supplements like Vitamin D. That's a good thing to be aware of, to have as healthy an immune system as you can."

Frazier has since recovered with the help of family, friends and community.

"I'm getting very good care and support from family and friends, including Westlake people," Frazier said, "so I still have much to be thankful for."

—Selah Maya Zighelboim

For women 15 to 54, breast cancer is the deadliest cancer.

Women with breast cancer are more likely to struggle with early menopause, fertility, body image and financial instability.

1 in 8 women

will get invasive breast cancer during her life.

1 in 1004 men

will get invasive breast cancer during his life.

Cravings for red meat and alcohol could be symptomatic of breast cancer.

Younger women face more aggressive cancer

and lower survival rates than older women.

15 percent

of women with breast cancer have a relative who has been diagnosed with breast cancer.



To read about Hill Country Middle School special education teacher Adrienne Harmon's battle with breast cancer, scan here.

Source: www.breastcancer.org