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May 8, 2003

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Young women have stake in breast cancer research

Teams forming for this Sunday's Making Strides Walk to fight breast cancer

LAKE OSWEGO, Ore. — Heather Hill learned at an early age what it's like to have a whole life changed with one diagnosis. Six weeks into her very first job as a dentist in Oregon City, Hill found out that the lump in her breast was more serious than previously thought.

"I was misdiagnosed," she said bluntly. "A year before, my doctor did a biopsy of the lump and said it was benign. A year later, I pushed for a mammogram and it turned out it was something serious."

Hearing you have breast cancer would take one's breath away at any age. Hearing those words at age 28 are an even greater shock, given that most breast cancer information is geared to women over 40 years of age.

Hill is speaking out about her experience to encourage women, men and loved ones of all ages to participate in this Sunday's in the American Cancer Society's "Making Strides Against Breast Cancer" 5-mile Walk. Registration begins at 9:00 a.m. and the Walk starts at 10 a.m., Sunday, May 18, in downtown Portland. The Walk begins and ends at a new, downtown location: the Portland Park Blocks between College St. and Harrison St. More than 365 teams already have signed up.

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A portion of the money raised during this walk is restricted to breast cancer research, which Hill says is desperately needed to advance studies on the impact of the disease on younger women.

Hill said that the experience has made her a better advocate for her own health. “I recommend that anyone with a concern should read up on the subject and make a list of questions to ask their doctor,” she said. “My experience really speaks to the issue that we don’t have a 100-percent screening mechanism for breast cancer. Self exams help, but they don’t catch everything.”

Hill was diagnosed in September 2001 and underwent a mastectomy the following month. What followed was six months of chemotherapy (which she describes as having the flu while riding a roller coaster for 48 hours) and a few more months of radiation treatments.

“First I felt fear, then I wanted to know what I needed to do to treat it,” Hill said. “Later I was mad at my doctors for misdiagnosing me and I wanted to make sure it didn’t happen to someone else. Apparently, they didn’t do all the diagnostic tests that they could have done.”

To turn her anger into positive energy, the 29-year-old Hill now works with other young breast cancer victims to ensure that they get the support she received. She also works as a tireless advocate for breast cancer research, and provides education and support through the Young Survival Coalition (www.youngsurvival.org).

According to the group’s Web site, young women diagnosed with breast cancer face higher mortality rates, fertility issues and the possibility and ramifications of early menopause.

“I have friends who have lost all ovarian function – they’re sterile from the chemotherapy,” Hill said. “There are other questions related to younger women, such as breast cancer’s effect on pregnancy. What type of treatment would be best for the patient? How would it affect the chance of survival? There’s a lot we just don’t know.”

The statistics are sobering. In Oregon, 2,600 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year, and 500 will die from the disease. The disease will strike nearly 205,000 people nationwide this year and claim more than 40,000 lives – 39,100 women and 400 men.

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However, statistics show that early detection saves lives. That is why the American Cancer Society's *Tell-A-Friend* program was created to ensure that every woman who needs a mammogram gets one.

Tell-A-Friend is a program that seeks volunteers and asks them to contact their friends, family members, co-workers and neighbors, to encourage them to schedule their annual mammogram.

Today Hill is working part time as a dentist and spending a lot of time advocating for breast cancer research and education. She and her dentist husband, Dan Pihlstrom, D.D.S., are remodeling their new home in Mountain Park. She also mentioned that they're thinking about starting a family.

This Sunday, Hill will be in Portland's Park Blocks, helping spread the word and lend support.

"Making Strides is a great event because women, men and kids walk together to help," said Rachel Verdick, Making Strides event manager for the American Cancer Society.. "Participation couldn't be easier: there is no enrollment fee or preregistration. Walkers simply arrive, register at the event and bring pledges."

A pledge form can be downloaded from the American Cancer Society's Web site at www.cancer.org. Donations help fund the American Cancer Society's breast cancer research, education, patient support and advocacy programs.

On May 18, registration begins at 9 a.m. and walkers may begin the 5-mile walk anytime between 10:00 a.m. and 11 a.m. Call the American Cancer Society for more registration information at (503) 795-3963.

For more information on breast cancer, contact the American Cancer Society, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, by calling its toll-free number, 1-800-ACS-2345, or by visiting its Web site at www.cancer.org.