

Looking good has new meaning for cancer survivor

By Marcy Horwitz
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

As a licensed cosmetologist, Areta Johnson's appearance has always been important to her. Like many women, a smaller tummy and fuller profile were high on her wish list — that is, until she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2001.

"Be careful what you wish for," warns Johnson, a Clay Pointe resident. Cancer surgery and treatment gave her the figure she'd always wanted — along with a bald head and supersensitive skin.

Breast cancer also gave Johnson the amazing gift of being able to find blessings in unexpected places, and other gifts as well.

Johnson's relationship with her father and stepmother had been problematic. Talking about her diagnosis and treatment prompted her father's wife to reveal that she, too, had battled cancer. Johnson and her stepmother forged a new relationship based on their shared experience. Her stepmother later became her walking partner during a National Cancer Walk in Washington, D.C.

After Johnson's surgery and treatment were over, she figured she'd put cancer behind her. Support groups? Not for her. She didn't want to be around negative people, and anyway, she didn't have the patience for meetings. "But chemo teaches you patience," she says wryly.

Johnson admits now that she was in denial. A single "Look Good. Feel Better"© session changed her thinking.

During the session, Johnson found help-

ful tips for dealing with the skin and hair changes that cancer treatment can cause. (She was "as bald as an eagle" at one point during her treatment. "Strangers thought I was making a fashion statement," she recalls.) Subsequent Look Good sessions helped her accept the changes that were happening to her and more.

Through Look Good sessions, she found support and companionship. Women, who couldn't talk about their illness in any other setting, opened up to one another.

Johnson saw the Look Good program as way to minister to people. As soon as she was able, she signed up to train as

a Look Good counselor. Today, the breast cancer patients she counsels are more than clients; they're friends.

"I can share my own experience with them," Johnson says, like the fact that cancer treatment makes skin supersensitive to ultraviolet rays. As a cosmetologist, she warns her Look Good clients to apply sun block faithfully. That often comes as news to her African-American clients.

But superficial differences like skin color have no meaning for Johnson. "We're different ages, different races, but we're all the same. There is no barrier between cancer victims," she says.

Today, Johnson is a five-year survivor. She's back at work at Twin Images in Ashland, the salon she owns with her twin sister.

She recently received a "Bright Lights" award from the International Ministers' Wives Association in recognition of her work with

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month



Elli Morris/Chesterfield Observer

As a "Look Good" counselor, Chesterfield resident Areta Johnson (right) helps women who have recently been diagnosed with cancer deal with the changes in appearance that treatment often brings. Johnson is a five-year survivor of breast cancer, and co-owns a salon in Ashland where she helps clients like Gloria Johnson (left) look their best.

cancer patients in the community.

Last month, Johnson was among the 10,000 people who gathered in Washington, D.C. as part of the American Cancer Society's Celebration of Life. She served as one of 74 Virginia delegates who lobbied lawmakers to support legislation to fund cancer research and training.

"We got word that Rep. Eric I. Cantor signed the legislation," says Johnson. "It made me feel like we really accomplished something."

Johnson is now working toward becoming

a Look Good trainer, so she'll be able to teach other cosmetologists how to work with cancer patients.

Breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer-related death in women after lung cancer

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New techniques speed treatment of breast cancer

By Marcy Horwitz
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When a woman has found a lump in her breast, she wants to see a doctor as soon as possible. She needs information, answers and options — fast.

Thankfully, new treatments and approaches mean that women can get the attention they need as soon as they need it.

One such new technique is the two-step treatment. The two-step treatment starts with a biopsy. As a result of new surgical techniques, biopsies can often be done on an outpatient basis, under local anesthetic, perhaps even in the doctor's office or mammography suite. In-office biopsies are preferred. They're easier on women than procedures that require a hospital stay.



If the lump is indeed cancerous — and not all tumors are — the second step of treatment begins with a discussion between patient and surgeon. As soon as scheduling permits, surgery and any follow-up treatments begin.

Other new innovations mean that women with breast cancer experience less trauma and require less—if any—hospitalization.

At the Virginia Breast Center, James Pelligrano, M.D. and Polly Stephens, M.D. are testing and developing a new process that allows

them to remove small lumps in their office. After they make a button-hole sized incision in the breast, they remove the affected tissue. Women can return home the same day.

Another hospital-shortening technique involves mapping the lymph system. As a result, doctors can remove only the affected nodes, rather than all lymph nodes. The patient's experience is less upsetting and physically debilitating.

In the past, treatment for breast cancer was one-size-fits-all. Every woman underwent chemotherapy and radiation. Today, new techniques like oncotyping allow doctors to determine whether chemotherapy will be necessary or even useful. As a result, some women won't have to undergo the rigors of chemo.

Genetic testing is an increasingly important tool in treating patients with a family history of breast or ovarian cancer. "We can test the whole family," says Deborah Jones, administrator of the Virginia Breast Center.

That includes men as well. According to the American Cancer Society, less than one percent of breast cancer sufferers are men, but men should be aware of risk factors such as family history of breast cancer.

Genetic testing can help identify those at greatest risk for breast cancer, enabling physicians to monitor patients more closely and increasing the chances of early diagnosis.

New techniques like these are effective tools against breast cancer, resulting in reduced stress. And that means fewer sleepless nights for women with breast cancer, and for the family members and friends who love them.