

Tahoe family copes with pancreatic cancer diagnosis

By Denise Rury

It's November, which for my family means its Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month, a time of remembrance, not just awareness. It was 2½ years ago that my mother, Jeanette Criner, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The gravity of this announcement was even more devastating because her father was also diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died within three weeks.

Despite what little she knew, really what most of us know about pancreatic cancer, she knew enough to know what a formidable enemy she was up against. The statistics are pretty dismal. Pancreatic cancer has the lowest survival rate of all cancers tracked by the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute: 94 percent of pancreatic cancer patients die within five years of diagnosis and only 6 percent will survive five more years. Seventy-four percent of patients die within the first year of diagnosis.



Jeanette
Criner

Jeanette was diagnosed with stage one pancreatic cancer, which gave her the option of having one of the few tools available in treating this cancer – surgery. The surgery, known as the Whipple operation, where the head of the pancreas, a portion

of the bile duct, the gallbladder and the duodenum is removed. It is a complicated and long surgery, but at this point it was the best option available. Tough Jeanette was understandably fearful, she was determined to do whatever it took to fight this.

The surgery seemed to have gone well, but unfortunately a few cancer cells were found outside of the pancreas and perhaps when she recovered from the surgery, gained some weight and was ready, chemotherapy was an option. This was late August 2008 and despite all the efforts of Jeanette with physical therapy, the care and attention of her medical staff, the love and support from her family, she continued a downhill battle that lasted seven months.

I watched my mother having gone from an active woman that at the age of 72 still worked, baked, tended to her garden and enjoyed hikes in and around her beloved Lake Tahoe to becoming a frail, depressed patient who lost hope when it became obvious that her best efforts just weren't working. Jeanette spent her last couple months surrounded by family, at various times from all across the country, even the world, which was of great comfort. She had the love and support at all times of her family here in Tahoe and would still get out and about to enjoy another favorite activity – coffee with her children or grandchildren to chat about the funny or mundane, anything but pancreatic cancer.

As her health continued to deteriorate, she made the decision to stop cancer treatments and start hospice care. I remember the last time she was outside, taking in the beauty of the lake and knowing it was the last time she would ever see Lake Tahoe. I remember how hard, even in the face of the obvious, trying to encourage her to keep fighting, have a reason, some reason to still be here but that day, with her staring out the window, looking at the lake, it was apparent that this was it. It was only a week or so later that she left for good.

Denise Rury is a resident of South Lake Tahoe.