

Think Pink: Early breast cancer detection saves lives

Publisher's note: October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. People are affected by cancer in all sorts of ways and communities do various things to shine a spotlight on various cancers. This is the first of four stories about cancer.

By Kathryn Reed

We had so many requests for mammograms in the next 30 days. It was incredible.

A fellow went home from work, called on the telephone and said I am going to put my wife on the phone and she is going to make an appointment for her mammogram.

In our imaging center where gals come to get mammograms it was unheard of to have men in that department. Today that department is full of support of their woman to have a mammogram. It has become socially acceptable.

Those are the words of Melody Christenson as she told *Lake Tahoe News* about the evolution of Think Pink. She is on the NorCal Think Pink board of directors.



When Christenson was working for MD Imaging in 1997, she along with oncologist Mike Figueroa of Cancer Care Consultants (now Solace Cancer Care) and Carol Lake of the American Cancer Society created Think Pink.

Today is the 16th annual Think Pink Breast Cancer Awareness Day.

While the movement started in Redding, the cause has spread to be an international drive to educate women about the need for regular mammograms. The Redding people got so many inquiries from people outside the area wanting to dovetail off the Think Pink theme that a video was created so people could start their own event. The video and other info are on the NorCal Think Pink Breast Cancer Awareness website.

"We want to let women know there is no prevention. We don't have any idea for the cause. Right now (it's about) early detection, self-breast exams, if they feel a lump or bump, get to their doctor," Figueroa told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Early detection is the best protection. That is the message."

The trio came up with Think Pink as a contrast to the Susan G. Komen Foundation's Denim Days that were going on 16 years ago. (Komen now is all about pink and not denim.) For one, Figueroa said helping promote Lee jeans had no correlation to breast cancer. Figueroa and Christenson said jeans are a regular clothing item in Redding so every day is denim day.

"In joking around we said if you really want someone to pay attention in Redding, they need to wear pink," Christenson said. Cowboys and construction workers in pink turn people's heads.

Today, someone not wearing pink is more likely to turn heads in this city that is ground zero for Think Pink.

Figueroa as director of a cancer center also knew how many women were being diagnosed with stage 3 and 4 breast cancer.

"It was out of proportion with what I thought should be the real numbers," he said. He knew with awareness, understanding and early mammograms that those numbers could be changed.

Figueroa said in the Redding area the number of women with stage 3 or 4 breast cancer dropped substantially in the first five years of Think Pink and after 10 years those numbers were

“tumbling down”. He added if he were to see 50 cases of breast cancer this year, maybe two or three would be stage 4.

“It is one of the cancers you can make a significant difference in the mortality rate if you know about it early,” Christenson said of breast cancer.

There is a 98 percent cure rate for people detected with stage 1 or 2 breast cancer.

Sixteen years ago, the group started handing out 500 bags of promotional material about what women can and should do when it comes to having healthy breasts. Now 40,000 bags are distributed – with a cadre of volunteers starting before the break of dawn.

Bags are handed out in the counties of Shasta, Tehama, Trinity, Modoc and Siskiyou.

Money raised by NorCal Think Pink goes toward education and being able to put on Think Pink Day.

In the first year more than \$1,000 was raised by having business owners donate \$1 for every employee who wore pink – really wore pink, not just a ribbon.

The board of directors that is responsible for Think Pink works year-round. While today is the big event, activities have been going on all month. After all, October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

The event culminates tonight with the Sundial Bridge being bathed in pink lights.

Breast cancer facts from the American Cancer Society and Centers for Disease Control and Protection:

- Excluding cancers of the skin, breast cancer is the most common cancer among women, accounting for nearly 1 in 3 cancers diagnosed in U.S. women.

- Ninety-five percent of new cases and 97 percent of breast cancer deaths occurred in women 40 years of age and older.
- Since 1971, the American Cancer Society has awarded approximately \$450.7 million in breast cancer research grants. The society is currently funding \$114 million in breast cancer research through more than 200 research study grants.
- In 2008 (the most recent year numbers are available), 210,203 women were diagnosed with breast cancer; 40,589 women died from breast cancer.