

Proactive approach to dealing with breast cancer

By Molly Hucklebridge Coolidge

Sept. 11 evokes a different meaning to South Lake Tahoe resident Christine O'Farrell than it does for most people. In 2002, on the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks, O'Farrell was on the operating table at Barton Memorial Hospital facing a new threat: cancer.

O'Farrell had been diagnosed with an aggressive case of breast cancer. At the time, she was 42 and working at Barton's Home Health and Hospice for quality assurance and infection prevention. Her three children were 14, 12, and 9.

"I thought I did everything right," O'Farrell recalls. "I exercised, I ate organic food, I didn't smoke, and I knew and avoided all the risk factors I could."

But she had a family history of breast cancer. Her aunt and cousin had it and as an extra precaution, O'Farrell started annual mammograms at age 35.

During a routine mammogram screening in August 2002, Barton Medical Imaging staff detected something in her breast. The radiologist conducted an ultrasound the same day and that "something" became "something suspicious."

A stereotactic breast biopsy confirmed it was breast cancer and it was growing fast. In less than a month, O'Farrell was on the operating table. As a nurse with an analytical and detailed mindset, she consulted multiple medical providers, researched her treatment options, and opted for a lumpectomy.

A lumpectomy is a less invasive surgery that only removes the cancerous tumor and the tissue surrounding it. Today, a

lumpectomy is a common treatment option, but O'Farrell says 13 years ago it was considered controversial.

After her lumpectomy that Sept. 11, O'Farrell underwent eight weeks of radiation. That December, she was free and clear of cancer.

"I feel very fortunate they were able to catch it early on and take action so quickly," O'Farrell said. "Early detection opened more options for treatment and the best possible outcomes."

O'Farrell continues to be an advocate for breast cancer prevention and early detection. She offers the following tips to help prevent or detect breast cancer:

- All women over age 40 should complete a mammogram screening annually. If you have a family history of breast cancer, ask your doctor when to start screenings and which is right for you. The Affordable Care Act requires all insurance carriers and Medicare to cover the patient's cost of a mammogram every 12 months.
- Women age 20 and over should conduct a self-exam of their breasts monthly and complete a clinical breast exam every year.
- Exercise regularly.
- Maintain a healthy body weight. Eat whole foods and at least five fruits and vegetables a day.
- Avoid smoking and limit alcohol intake. Smoking and heavy alcohol use greatly increase your risk of cancer.
- If you or a loved one receive a breast cancer diagnosis, be proactive. Research your options, get a second opinion, and be your own advocate.

Today, O'Farrell remains cancer free. She continues to get mammogram screenings every year, and her risk of reoccurrence is the same as never having a cancer diagnosis.

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Note: Christine O'Farrell, director of Quality Management, oversees quality assurance, patient safety, and infection prevention for Barton Health. Thanks to a \$220,000 donation from the Barton Auxiliary, Barton's Medical Imaging will be purchasing a 3-D Breast Tomosynthesis, an advanced type of mammogram. October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

Molly Hucklebridge Coolidge is communications specialist for Barton Health.