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## Early detection saves woman from breast cancer

St. Johns, MI – A staggering 7,000 Michigan women are diagnosed with breast cancer each year. Judy Wernert, a Public Health Nurse for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD), never dreamed she'd be one of them.

“Breast cancer was the farthest thing from my mind,” said Wernert. “I was busy living my life, oblivious to the cancer that was silently growing inside my body.”

According to Dr. Robert Graham, Medical Director for MMDHD, early detection is a critical factor to winning the fight against breast cancer; and it's a statement Wernert feels very strongly about as well.

“There is no doubt in my mind that finding the cancer in its early stages saved my life,” she said. “I can't stress how important it is for women to complete a self breast exam every month and to receive an annual clinical exam by a doctor or practitioner and to receive regular mammograms when necessary.”

In January 2005 Wernert passed her annual gynecological exam with flying colors; no problems were detected. Just one month later, while conducting a self breast exam, she faced every woman's worst nightmare; she found a lump in one of her breasts.

She immediately scheduled an appointment with her physician, who originally thought the lump was nothing more than a cyst. That sense of relief was short-lived, however. In March a mammogram and ultrasound revealed an abnormality not cyst-like in nature. In April she was referred to a surgeon who performed a biopsy; the result of which actually came back negative.

“At that point I just wanted it out,” Wernert explains. “I wasn't sure what it was, but I knew I wanted it removed and didn't want to waste anymore time.”

In May Wernert underwent surgery at Sparrow hospital to remove the lump. While the surgery went according to plan, she was surprised to learn that the surgeon found and removed two lumps, not just one as previously thought.

Several days later while Wernert was at work at MMDHD, she received a call from her surgeon that would change her life forever. She had stage two breast cancer. After processing the devastating information, Wernert made the decision to tackle the disease head-on. “I made a vow to myself and my family that I would do everything in my power to beat it,” she said.

Her fight against breast cancer began with a trip to the Comprehensive Breast Clinic at Sparrow Hospital where she met with a panel of physicians from Sparrow Hospital, Michigan State University and Breslin Cancer Center. She was then presented with the team's treatment recommendations, which included chemotherapy and radiation.

Wernert underwent another surgery in June to remove additional tissue surrounding the area where the lumps had been and to have a port inserted, which would be used to deliver the chemotherapy treatments.

By August she had successfully recovered from surgery and was ready to begin the recommended four rounds of chemotherapy.

October brought the changing of the seasons as well as the start of a grueling 33 cycles of radiation treatments. “I scheduled early morning radiation appointments so that I could still make it to work on time,” said Wernert who worked part-time during her treatment. For some people, continuing to work at a difficult time like this would be

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out of the question, but Wernert found it therapeutic. “Part of my job is working with the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program at MMDHD,” she said. “It was wonderful to be able to continue to work; it was a welcome distraction from what was going on in my life, plus it was such a joy to be around all the little kids!”

Wernert finished her radiation treatments just before Christmas, which as she put it, was a wonderful gift.

Following a normal mammogram, Judy was able to breathe a sigh of relief, knowing she was well on her way to recovery. Having beat cancer had given her a new lease on life and a whole new outlook. “It made me realize I didn’t need to sweat the small stuff and to never take things or the important people in my life for granted,” she said. “I try to smile and laugh more and do my best to live each day to the fullest.”

To raise awareness of the disease that could have taken her life, the 40 year old cancer survivor began participating in the 5K Susan G. Komen “Race for the Cure.” Judy and her team, the “Pink Diamonds” have completed four Komen races, which, according to Judy is an experience like no other. “It’s such a celebration of life,” said Judy. “In addition to completing the walk and raising money for a wonderful cause, it’s a day to celebrate the sisterhood that unites us all. It’s a day to reflect with family and friends, and to meet and talk with others who are going through the same battles.”

Being around other survivors is inspirational for Wernert. “The sense of accomplishment you feel when you finish the race with your family cheering you on, alongside 7,000 other survivors and their teammates is amazing,” she said.

Judy credits her long-time co-worker, Kim Monahan, with thinking of the name “Pink Diamonds.” According to Monahan, the “Pink” ties in with the Komen’s pink ribbon. She chose “Diamonds” because they are strong, shiny and beautiful. She wanted Wernert and other women battling breast cancer to remember that they are beautiful inside and to draw from their inner strength.

What attracted Judy to the Komen race is that a percentage of funds raised is given back to local communities in the form of grants to fund programs such as MMDHD’s breast cancer screening program. The program, which is funded by the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, offers free breast cancer screenings to uninsured or underinsured women age 40 to 64 in Clinton County.

MMDHD also provides residents of Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm Counties with free breast exams, mammograms, pelvic exams and pap smears through its Breast and Cervical Cancer Control Program (BCCCP) to women who qualify. The program is available to women age 40 to 64 with an annual income of \$25,000 for a one-person family or \$51,625 for a four-person family. Women diagnosed with cancer through the BCCCP may also be eligible to receive Medicaid for their cancer treatment.

Looking back, Judy is still thankful for all the support she received from family, friends, and the community (school, teachers, kids’ sports teams). “I give my husband a lot of credit too,” she said. “He kept up with the house work, drove me to my appointments and worked full time. I know my illness was especially difficult for him because he lost his mother to breast cancer when she was just 59. He took everything in stride and assured me that we’d get through it together. I just tried to keep the faith that everything would work out and did my best to have a positive attitude.”

This past year Judy celebrated her 5<sup>th</sup> year of survivorship and is living proof that early detection is the key to surviving breast cancer. If you are uninsured or underinsured or think you may qualify for the Komen Program or BCCCP, contact MMDHD today at:

Clinton County Branch Office: 989-227-3118

Gratiot County Branch Office: 989-875-1014

Montcalm County Branch Office: 989-831-3606

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