



## Vicki Wagner, Healthy Partner Gulfstream Appleton

### **The Importance of a Routine Mammography Screening**

I truly thought I would be the last person to get breast cancer. I have never had any lumps, bumps, or other issues. According to urban legend, being a more “full figured” gal should also have worked in my favor. Wrong.

What started my getting a mammogram was my mother having breast cancer. She found a lump and, at that time, all they knew was radical mastectomy as a course of treatment. The breast was removed along with some of the muscle and all of the lymph nodes under the arm. Not a pleasant experience and years of recovery, but she was considered surgically cured. That was 34 years ago. She has never had a recurrence.

What started me on annual physicals was birth control as a young woman. I schedule my annual physical around the time of my birthday. Pap tests and mammograms are not what most women want for their birthday, but it is an easy reminder. I went for the routine mammogram on Thursday, January 3rd.

The technician mentioned that she could see a slight change since last year, but that was not uncommon in a woman “my age.” It was probably some calcification or fatty tissue, and I shouldn’t be surprised if the radiologist asked me to come back in for a few retakes. I was banking on fatty tissue. Sure enough, Tuesday morning, January 8th, the doctor’s office called and asked if I could stop by so they could retake two of the views. It would take 20 minutes, and I could come in over my lunch hour.

Fifteen views later, I am calling my boss to let him know what is happening, and that I am being asked to stay for an ultrasound. As the doctor was doing the ultrasound, I could see what he was looking at. It was a dark spot that looked like a kidney bean on the screen, but actually it was only 0.07 centimeters. He was able to do a needle biopsy right then, so we would know for sure what it was within 48 hours. By the way, the only pain I felt was the injection of the local anesthetic.

Thursday morning, I got the phone call. All I could think was, “What did you just say?” I had a well-defined, invasive carcinoma. “Well-defined” means the cells were just that, no rough or blurry edges. Easier to remove and be certain that they got all of it. “Invasive” means some of the cancer cells had migrated outside of the milk duct. This means chemotherapy along with the radiation. FYI — most breast cancers occur in the duct.

Here is the good news. It was so early that I had a lumpectomy (even though I had no palpable lump). The size of the cancer plus surrounding tissue that they needed to remove to be certain they got all of it was so small that the tissue filled back in. No prosthetics or implants. More good news. Instead of 5, 6, 7 weeks of radiation every day, 5 days a week, I got to have Mammosite radiation. This is done with a tiny balloon implant in the breast and is twice a day for 5 days. The radiation is put directly into the breast area where the cancer was via a catheter. A more effective approach with a lot less burning.

Also, chemotherapy was a lot less intensive. I had four treatments, 3 weeks apart, so I wasn't sick to my stomach. I did lose my hair and had some muscle pain in my legs. Trust me, this was no picnic, but I'm sure everyone knows someone who has had to undergo a much worse course of treatment with more severe side effects.

The fact is that getting a mammogram and continuing to get them on a regular basis can save your life. I was told that most breast cancers are not fast growing. It may have taken as much as 5 years for my cancer to be large enough to be seen on the mammogram. It could have taken as much as another 5 years before I would have found a lump.

Being that it was invasive, I cannot imagine how wide spread it may have become by then and what course of treatment I would have had to take.

Don't put off getting a mammogram. Don't let your spouse put off getting one either. If you are young, getting one now establishes a baseline to compare against future mammograms. If you are a more "mature" woman, what are you waiting for?

I've already had my first mammogram since my treatment and gotten the "all clear." Will have another one in 6 months, and then annually after that. My blood work will also be monitored to be sure there is nothing there either.

One final note — through a friend of a friend of a friend, Deanna Favre heard of me and sent me a pink Green Bay Packers hat signed by her and her husband, Brett, the Packers quarterback. Her message to me was:

**“There will be times when you will hold your  
breath and times that will take your breath away.  
Stay strong. You will get through this.”**

How fortunate am I!

*Vicki Wagner*

