



Male spreads breast cancer awareness

News

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Edmee Rodriguez/Nursing News photo: LIVING CANCER FREE: Bret Miller was diagnosed with male breast cancer earlier this year. Miller was treated at the Kansas City Cancer Center and is cancer free today.

If Bret Miller has learned one principle in the last six months, it is to spread the word. Miller, 24, Prairie Village, Kan., joined the ranks of cancer survivors and wants to help others by spreading the message of early detection.

“Early detection is the key to prevention,” Miller said. “Self-examination is the best thing to do.”

Miller was diagnosed and treated for breast cancer, which is rare in men. Miller said 1 percent of all breast cancer cases are in men and that most men who find a lump in their breast ignore it. If the lump is cancerous and left unattended, it will spread. Between 450 and 500 American men die annually from breast cancer because they ignored the signs, Miller said.

“By the time they get it checked it’s too late,” he said.

When Miller was 17 years old, he found a lump the size of a lima bean in his right breast directly beneath his nipple. He showed the lump to his primary care doctor during a college physical and was told it was most likely a calcium deposit, not uncommon among young men transitioning from puberty. His doctor said not to worry, but to keep an eye on it.

Eighteen months ago, Miller noticed a discharge from the nipple on his right breast, but

was too embarrassed to say anything about it until he scheduled a physical examination this spring as part of his health care plan. He told his doctor about the lump and discharge. Miller's doctor scheduled an ultrasound at an imaging center, where the attending physician added a mammogram.

"She said she had never seen anything like this," he said.

Based on the ultrasound and mammogram results, surgery was recommended and then scheduled with Steven Behrends, M.D. to remove the lump. Miller said he felt relieved after the lumpectomy and thought the problem was resolved.

"I was happy with the removal," he said. "I was embarrassed about having it because I didn't know what it was."

Several days after the surgery, he returned to his job as pool manager. As he left work that day to drive to his second job as a bartender, Miller's cell phone rang. His surgeon told him the preliminary pathology reports pointed to breast cancer. Miller said he was not completely surprised.

"It wasn't shocking," he said. "We'll deal with it."

Miller met with Kansas City surgeon Lon McKrosky, M.D., who has performed most of Kansas City's male mastectomies. Because of the rare nature of his cancer, Miller said McKrosky consulted with surgeons throughout Kansas City and at MD Anderson Cancer Center and Johns Hopkins Hospital to determine whether to do a single or double mastectomy. They decided on a single.

"The mastectomy for males – it's really the only option," Miller said.

After Miller's right nipple and part of his breast were removed, he received four infusions of chemotherapy then started on Tamoxifen.

"Anything to lower the chances and lower the possibility (of recurrence)," he said.

Miller's physicians agree the lump he discovered at 17 years old was not cancerous but later became cancerous. Because his cancer was diagnosed at stage one, Miller responded favorably to the treatment. As a survivor he wants others to understand the importance of early detection, and then act on it. He wants to raise awareness especially among young people, where breast cancer is on the rise.

Miller participated in the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Walk, served as an official "pinker" at the J.C. Nichols horse fountain, and launched the Bret Miller 1T Foundation at www.checkthem.org to raise awareness and cancer funding.

"If you question anything about your body, please go get it checked," Miller said. "I feel like God has a plan for everybody. I enjoy helping people. This happened for a reason. Whatever I can do to spread the word, spread the awareness."

Mary Beth McGrew, RN, OCN, practices at Kansas City Cancer Center where Miller was treated with chemotherapy. She gave several infusions to Miller and watched him cope with and grow from the experience. She said any mother would be proud of the way Miller looked outside himself during the treatment.

"He was more confident than most 24-year-olds I know," she said. "He's about the message. He's not afraid to talk about it."

She said his foundation speaks to young people.

"It's going to exponentially get the word out," she said. "That's so important. He's just ballooned and broadened that message. It's awesome."