



RECORD BREAKER, CANCER SURVIVOR

Published on August 27, 2002

© 2002- The Press Democrat

BYLINE: LEAH ETLING
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT PAGE: C5

COLUMN: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Two years ago, Kathy Van Riper (nee Dalton) was recovering from the birth of her second child, enjoying life as a stay-at-home mom and looking forward to a summer filled with running, family and friends when the unthinkable occurred. Her husband, Marc, noticed a lump in her breast. Kathy, then 30, figured it was a clogged milk duct -- she was still nursing her newborn son, Ian -- and shrugged it off.

But Marc, a Kaiser laboratory supervisor, urged his wife to see a doctor.

"I was not worried," said Van Riper, who, as Kathy Dalton, was a high school distance star for Sonoma Valley, graduated in 1987 and attended Northern Arizona University on an athletic scholarship. "I thought 'I don't have cancer, I'm young, I'm a runner. Runners don't get things like this.'"

Initially, her physician wasn't worried, either. But he decided to send her for an ultrasound, just in case.

A biopsy revealed the lump was cancerous. Kathy and Marc struggled to comprehend the diagnosis.

"I had no family history of cancer, I was 30 years old, I was nursing," Kathy said. "I didn't understand."

She had surgery to remove the lump, but doctors also found the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes, meaning she would have to undergo chemotherapy and radiation.

"She would get so sick after a treatment, she wouldn't move for three days," Marc said. "On the fourth or fifth day, she would get out and walk. About a week after treatment she was running at almost normal distance and speed."

Kathy felt she was running slow. In high school, she was far ahead of everyone, finishing cross country races as much as two minutes faster than her competition. In track, she ran two miles in 11:06, still the school record at Sonoma Valley High.

After the cancer treatments, she was running nine-minute miles and covering her head with a bandanna after all her hair fell out.

"(The doctors) were kind of amazed," she said. "I thought if I can run through pregnancy, I can run through chemo. Something has to be the same."

During her treatments, Kathy learned about Susan Komen's Race for the Cure, a benefit held around the country for breast cancer research and awareness. The competitive divisions in the race included one for survivors.

Competing just days after her second chemo treatment, she was the third survivor in the 5K. Last fall, shortly after concluding her treatments, she won the survivor division.

Two California Races for the Cure -- San Francisco in October and Sacramento in May -- have become the Van Rippers' key events. The family attends local races together, though Kathy said it is harder to focus on running when family comes first.

Marc, a high school wrestler while growing up in Colorado, thought he was a runner when he met Kathy at an EMT training class eight years ago.

``But my idea of running was two miles as fast as I could go," said Marc, who had met fitness requirements in the Coast Guard and as a firefighter.

Much of their dating included running in the parks of Santa Rosa, where Kathy pulled Marc along on seven-mile jaunts, far beyond what he'd run before.

``That was the best opportunity to get to know one another," Marc said. ``We spent that whole time talking."

Kathy and Marc celebrated their seventh wedding anniversary in July. Daughter Jillian is 5 and son Ian 2.

Currently cancer-free, Kathy lives with the knowledge the disease could come back. But she doesn't dwell on numbers that hypothesize young women with aggressive tumors are more likely to suffer a recurrence.

``My risk of getting cancer was so slim -- why should I rely on statistics?" Kathy said.

She has focused on home-schooling her daughter, who starts kindergarten in the fall and just recently asked her mom to time her as she ran around the block for the first time.

``She is an inspiration to many, many people," Marc said of his wife.

During her treatment, Kathy was thrilled by a phone call from Steve Scott, holder of the American record in the mile, whom she had met in high school.

A survivor of testicular cancer, Scott's return to competition after the disease was unheralded proof that life after cancer can resume.

Kathy Van Riper has done the same.