

Published September 29, 2007

Pink Ribbon Golf Classic celebrates life

Three women drawn together by one cause take different courses.

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Connie Weinert knew something was wrong.

She'd been going for routine mammograms for years, but this time was different.

The radiologist and nurses "all had poker faces," the Ponte Vedra Beach woman said of that visit to Mayo Clinic a year ago.

"I knew. I could feel the energy in the room."

When a subsequent biopsy confirmed what the mammogram indicated, that Weinert had breast cancer, the avid golfer and mother of twin teenage boys opted to schedule surgery for a double mastectomy.

Nervous, she tried to reassure family and friends that it was "business as usual," and prepared herself for the physical and emotional challenges to come.

But during a visit to Mayo, she was shocked to run into a buddy from the Ponte Vedra Women's Golf Association in the waiting room.

"What are you doing here?" Weinert asked Nancy Aves.

Aves asked Weinert the same question.

The women were surprised to discover they both had breast cancer, but they were even more surprised when they learned another woman in the 125-member golf association, Becky Jewett, also just had the disease diagnosed.

"Three people in our group contracting breast cancer at the same time" spurred the group to action, Jewett said.

To raise money for research to fight the disease, they organized the Pink Ribbon Golf Classic, which will be Tuesday.

All funds raised from the inaugural event that they plan to make annual will support women's breast cancer research at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville.

"Breast cancer is something we don't like to think about, but when friends are impacted, you can't ignore it," said Duffy Kopriva, a chairwoman of the captain's choice foursome scramble tournament, which will be at the Ponte Vedra Inn and Club's Ocean Course.

"When so many of our members ended up with breast cancer, we wanted to do something. Raising money for research seemed the best thing we could do after supporting our friends on a friend-to-friend basis," Kopriva said. "We know these ladies, we see them going through the struggle with the disease."

While they all had the same disease, Weinert, Jewett and Aves chose different treatment options that were open to them based on their individual cases.

Weinert had reconstructive surgery after the double mastectomy.

Jewett had a lumpectomy, where a malignant tumor and a rim of normal tissue were removed.

Aves had a double mastectomy but no reconstructive surgery.

"So much as we are the same," Weinert said, "every case is different."

Weinert's struggle began Sept. 10, 2006, when her breast cancer was diagnosed.

She had been "on the radar" with doctors, receiving mammograms every six months since age 26 in 1987, because her breasts tended to develop cysts.

She had started playing golf five years ago after moving from Atlanta and had made a lot of friends through the sport and the Women's Golf Association, which plays weekly at the Ponte Vedra Inn and Club.

She credits those friends with helping her deal with her disease and with recovery after her surgery in mid-October last year.

Given the facts of her case, Weinert said she decided to have a double mastectomy because doctors told her the cancer had not spread to her lymph nodes, and if she had that surgery, she would not need radiation or chemotherapy.

"They promised me a lifetime of poking, prodding, needles, mammograms, MRI's and chemo and radiation if I chose a lumpectomy," said Weinert.

After watching friends and acquaintances go through that and seeing how it affected their lives, she said, "I can't be that sick."

After her reconstructive surgery, Weinert was eager to get back to her previous lifestyle, which included playing golf.

Jewett was also eager to go back to playing golf.

After receiving the cancer diagnosis, "I wanted a plan, I wanted a team, and I wanted to move on as quickly as I could," Jewett said.

Since her doctors were comfortable with doing a lumpectomy, she said she was, too, even if it meant getting chemotherapy and radiation.

"I was out of my golf loop for a little over a year because of my treatment." Jewett said.

Aves, 75, decided to get a double mastectomy but she doesn't want reconstructive surgery because of her age.

She hasn't been able to get back to playing much golf, because she is now helping to care for her husband, John, who has lung cancer.

But she formed a foursome for the tournament.

Kopriva said the tournament has been a success.

After raising about \$25,000, she said they've exceeded their initial goal and feel good about helping fight the disease that struck their friends.