

Newspaper article

Aug. 1, 2005- Cancer survivor advocates for education

By KATIE MASTERS, Staff writer

Three years ago doctors told El Dorado Hills resident Julie Tibbitts that she had less than one year to live.

Diagnosed with breast cancer, which spread to her hip, vertebrae, and ribs, the then 28-year-old woman had another worry.

She was 31 weeks pregnant.

Three years later, however, with the support of her husband, Jim Tibbitts, her family, and all of her doctors, both Tibbitts and 2 1/2-year-old Jessica are doing great.

Tibbitts' story is not only one of strength, but is also one that will educate people about how important it is to ask questions and demand answers.

Tibbitts first knew something was wrong when she started feeling severe pain in her hips.

"(The doctor) kept telling me it was sciatica," she said, but the pain was growing worse and she could not walk.

The doctors kept believing it was sciatica because they did not want to do anything to disturb or hurt the baby by running tests on Tibbitts.

"Finally my mother demanded they do something," she said.

The day of her baby shower, Tibbitts saw an orthopedic surgeon. He determined the pain she was feeling was not caused by sciatica, but by a tumor "the size of an Idaho baked potato," Tibbitts said.

Within a couple of days Tibbitts traveled to Stanford Medical Center to see another orthopedic oncologist. That doctor confirmed the tumor and informed Tibbitts that she had breast cancer that had spread to her hip, ribs, 15 different spots on her liver, and her vertebrae, which was 70 percent collapsed.

"I was shocked," Tibbitts said of her initial reaction, "but almost immediately my family and I got in the fight mode."

"I told them, 'no tears,'" she said.

Her family gave support, both emotional and financial, and her husband, Jim, was on the computer researching all the time to learn more and to try to find additional help.

The first priority was to deliver the baby so Tibbitts could start radiation. On Dec. 23, 2002, baby Jessica was delivered nine weeks early at 3 pounds 13 ounces. Jessica was a pound bigger than expected and healthy, but still small. She had absolutely no problems, said Tibbitts. The concerns about the premature baby were countless, but Tibbitts said the baby's ability to breathe was a main issue.

The very next day Tibbitts was prepped to start radiation. On Christmas day, 2002, she started radiation on her hip and vertebrae. After four weeks of radiation, doctors started reconstructing Tibbitts' bones with titanium rods.



THE TIBBITTS FAMILY, from left, Julie, Jim and Jessica, enjoy time together at their El Dorado Hills home. In 2002 Julie was told she had less than a year to live. The family would not accept that diagnosis and have fought a valiant battle. See story "Cancer ..."
Democrat photo by Joanne McCubrey

After six weeks in the hospital, Jim could finally take his girls home. The family received good news when Tibbitt's sister-in-law, a 15-year breast cancer survivor, recommended to the couple the Arlington Cancer Center in Arlington, Tex.

The Tibbitts took a trip to Texas and met with Karel A. Dicke, MD, an oncologist, hematologist, and renowned bone marrow and stem cell transplantation specialist.

Dr. Dicke was confident that Tibbitts would live a full life. He prescribed aggressive chemotherapy and urged the family to move to Arlington so Tibbitts could pursue the treatment.

Three weeks later, the Tibbitts rented out their El Dorado Hills house, packed a few things and rented an apartment near the Arlington Cancer Center.

"We went with our gut, believed in our gut, and didn't doubt anything," Tibbitts said, "We just learned about it (the cancer) as much as possible and trusted in Dr. Dicke."

Jim Tibbitts, who owns his own golf company, has an amazing business partner, John Gouker, and a great crew at his warehouse who stepped up and allowed Jim to be in Texas with his wife.

Nine months later, after nine rounds of heavy chemotherapy, a mastectomy, and a liver radial ablation (the removal or destruction of the liver), Tibbitts was declared cancer free and in remission.

"We got home in December 2003," Tibbitts said, "just before Jessica's first birthday."

Tibbitts inspiration to get better was her family, "especially Jessica," she said.

Once home, she started seeing Dr. Kristie Bobolis in Roseville, who worked with Dr. Dicke's protocol. Tibbitts had radiation on the breast for six more weeks and currently undergoes treatment once a week. She is also in the process of reconstruction on her breasts and growing her hair back after losing it from chemotherapy.

"I feel blessed to have such an amazing group of doctors," Tibbitts said of her doctors, both in Texas and California. She said a lot of the time doctors do not like to listen to each other and go about procedures in their own ways. All her doctors, however, worked together.

"I will continue maintenance chemotherapy my whole life ... I go to Texas every three months for scans," she said.

"People ask how I do it. It is just a part of life, like going to work," she said, "... I feel great. I have a very optimistic and positive family who never looked back. The people I met along the way helped me to pull through. It was like our own little cancer family."

Last May Tibbitts, her family, and friends formed "Team Tibbitts" for the Sacramento Komen Race for the Cure. The Komen Breast Cancer Foundation is an organization dedicated to the fight against breast cancer by supporting innovative research and outreach programs, according to the foundation. Tibbitts said there was more than 23,000 people at the race wearing pink to support the survivors.

"I love the Komen Foundation," she said.

She decided to form "Team Tibbitts," which consisted of 30 members who walked a 5K.

"To me it was a privilege because I never thought I'd walk again. It was a real honor ... I'm a very proud survivor. I do (Komen Race for the Cure) for all the friends I've lost to breast cancer in Arlington."

Her advice to patients and their families who are dealing with cancer: "Be your own advocate. Learn about your treatments. Demand scans and tests to be done."

Breast cancer is the most common form of malignant disease among women and affects one in every 10 women in the U.S., according to Arlington Cancer Center. The disease took 40,000 lives in the U.S. in 2002, it also reports. Arlington Cancer Center is dedicated to supporting the fight against breast cancer through innovative treatment options.

Julie, Jim, and Jessica Tibbitts, along with their family, are fighters who never gave up. Instead of groaning about their situation, they learned about it and asked questions, moves that played a significant role in helping Julie Tibbitts live

life through.

More information on the Komen Foundation can be found at sackomen.org and information about Arlington Cancer Center can be found at acctx.com.