



lives forever changed before 40



LISTENING TO THEIR
BODIES, THREE WOMEN
SEEK EARLY DETECTION
AND STOP BREAST
CANCER IN ITS TRACKS

The world stops for many people the moment a doctor utters the word “cancer.” The news comes as an even greater shock when there was no reason for alarm: the patient was in the prime of her life, had no family history, and was given a clean bill of health by her primary care physician within the previous few months.

Three local women, all diagnosed before the age of 40, each learned firsthand that cancer, specifically breast cancer, doesn’t discriminate based on age, race or socioeconomic standing.



As you meet Dawn Martin, Charlotte Matthews and Sheller Bolton, you will see how these women quickly became determined to overcome their diagnosis and return to the lives they had worked so hard to build.

Individually, each woman experienced a full circle of emotion, starting with a sense of paralysis, when all the positive momentum of life comes to a halt and the looming fight takes center stage. But they each paid attention to their bodies from the beginning, and sought screenings before conventional wisdom indicates it necessary. Now, they share a new determination – advocating for breast cancer awareness in our community.

each woman has a unique story to tell

No two fights against breast cancer are the same. As a result, there is no precise script to follow to deal with personal emotions, concerns

about how this will affect children, family and friends, and what will happen physically and mentally over the course of treatment.

But despite the differences, camaraderie with those who have experienced similar battles can provide strength, encouragement and personal growth.

Dawn, Charlotte and Sheller have each waged their own fight against cancer. Dawn is dealing with fresh physical reminders. For Sheller, memories from years ago are tucked in the back of her mind, but are never far out of focus. Charlotte, a professor and poet, translates her experience into art through writing.

Although at first glance their stories appear to be different, as they walk the road together as breast cancer survivors, a common thread is revealed. The women refuse to let their experiences hold them back, and instead serve as passionate leaders for other ladies to follow.

dawn martin



This time last year Dawn Martin's daily routine was drastically different. She was making frequent visits to Martha Jefferson for chemotherapy, and dealing with the ups and downs that go hand-in-hand with treatment instead of maintaining her daily routine: working out, being an active mother of three and grandmother, and attending her daughter's volleyball games and her son's athletic events at Monticello High School.

With a deep family history of breast cancer, Dawn has always been aware of the importance of screenings. Her baseline mammogram showed no abnormalities. At the age of 38 however, a self-examination revealed something that made Dawn raise an eye. She knew her next call would be to her physician and a visit to Martha Jefferson Hospital.

"I felt something strange and it just didn't seem quite right," Dawn recalled. "I had undergone a mammogram less than a year ago, but without hesitation the doctors went ahead and did another one since I was feeling different."

The next thing Dawn knew she was sitting in an office at Martha Jefferson with her husband and doctor early the Saturday morning following a repeat mammogram and core needle biopsy days before. That's when she received her diagnosis, Stage 2 cancer which they soon found had spread to her lymph nodes.

Even though she had always known there was a good possibility the disease would strike, Dawn was stunned by the news. "Everything started happening really fast," said Dawn. "There wasn't any time wasted and the whole process became my life."



Despite her surprise, she quickly realized overcoming her cancer was not impossible. But it wasn't as easy for her family and friends. They desperately wanted to help, but didn't know how to best offer their support.

"It became clear to me the biggest misconception people have about cancer is you always feel sick," Dawn said. "I didn't feel 100 percent all the time, but it also didn't hold me back."

Dawn also knew the process wasn't easy for her teenagers, as they tried to grasp their mom's new look, sans breasts and hair. That's when she joined forces with a local photographer.

"I wanted to do something to show everyone I was comfortable with my body, with the way I looked, so I spent the day with the photographer. It's been wonderful to have the photos to share with people. They're a constant reminder you don't have to stop living when you fight cancer. The disease actually helped me live better."

Although she's only been finished with treatments for a few months, Dawn is back to her normal routine. One of her photos, however, sits on the entertainment center in her house as a constant reminder for herself, and anyone who sees it, of the journey she has taken.



After receiving her cancer diagnosis and beginning treatment, Dawn spent a day with a local photographer. "I wanted to do something to show everyone I was comfortable with my body."

charlotte matthews



In 2005, Charlotte Matthews was a busy mom, teaching part time at Piedmont Virginia Community College and raising two young children. She was 39.

When Charlotte became aware of the free mammogram screenings offered at Martha Jefferson, she scheduled an appointment. Breast cancer was not a part of her family history, but she had a vague, disconcerting feeling something in her body wasn't right. So Charlotte followed her hunch.

Her first mammogram was difficult to read, so a doctor called and ordered a second, digital mammogram. Immediately after reading those results, the doctor sat down with Charlotte and shared her diagnosis.

"The only thing I could do at that moment was ask for help," recalled Charlotte. "I ended up spending an hour with Mary Beth Revak, the Women's Health Liaison at Martha Jefferson, and although I felt as if my world was

shattered, she was so comforting. I felt as though I'd suddenly got a sister and I knew I would never be alone."

The doctors at Martha Jefferson began Charlotte's treatment just days after her diagnosis. A mastectomy was followed by a rigorous chemotherapy routine and radiation.

"The doctors and nurses were careful to balance reality with great compassion. They gave me a lot of hope. A lot of hope."

To add a challenge to the already difficult process and time in her life, many days Charlotte had little visitors in tow when she walked through the hospital doors.

As time went on and Charlotte began radiation, she turned to poetry, one of her passions, for support. By putting her words on paper, the reality of what happened became clear, as did Charlotte's ultimate goal. She was determined to help other women find strength through the experience.

"Cancer teaches you to live more for the moment, more in the present. I started looking for the miracles in life happening in front of me. Although I realize the truth is women are

The Cancer Patient Dreams

This is the underside of the world
delicate and transparent as ice,
as maple leaves red as heat,
the very ones she raked this morning,
the ones strewn all over the yard,
so the made piles rattle
the exact moment
the train goes by, carrying coal
from the mountains eastward.
She turns and goes inside,
sweeps her room in the dark,
hoping for an alchemist,
someone to change lead into gold.

going to continue to be diagnosed with breast cancer, I want to help them to not be afraid, and instead look at it as a chance to grow."

Charlotte has published two poems about her experiences. Each spring she also participates in Relay for Life, a 24-hour walk benefitting the American Cancer Society. It is an opportunity for Charlotte to join others and stand beside those fighting the fight, offering support, and displaying a positive attitude. For those in the beginning of their fight, the compassion is priceless.

sheller bolton



Sheller Bolton celebrates a successful Martha's Market with Didi Chapin, a fellow member of The Women's Committee.

"Cancer is with me all the time. Not many days go by when I don't think about it. It really does change your perspective on life."

Sheller Bolton was diagnosed with breast cancer 19 years ago. It was an unwanted 34th birthday present.

"All I could do was look at my kids and think I wasn't going to be able to see them grow up."

Reflecting on the process nearly two decades later, Sheller is certain the individualized care she received at Martha Jefferson made all the difference in her experience, from diagnosis to discharge.

A constant pain under her arm prompted Sheller's visit to her primary care physician. The physician initially dismissed the concern, but before Sheller could leave the room, her doctor was back having decided to order a mammogram.

"To this day I'm not sure what exactly made her change her mind, I'm so fortunate she listened to me," said Sheller. "I knew my situation seemed strange, as I didn't fit the breast cancer profile at the time. But she looked at me as an individual, and there are no rules when it comes to cancer."

When the results came back, it was determined Sheller did have cancer, but in the opposite breast of the one with pain. Not two weeks later, she had a mastectomy, but that was all. No chemotherapy. No radiation. Her doctors thought there was a greater risk putting Sheller through the process than the chance of cancer reoccurring. Although many of her friends and family members were concerned about the decision, Sheller did not look back.

"I have a relationship with my doctors and I trust my doctors. For me, it was about moving forward and not being bombarded with an overwhelming amount of information."

In 2000, Sheller took a huge step forward joining The Women's Committee of Martha Jefferson Hospital, an organization dedicated to raising awareness and funding for women's health initiatives in our community. Although she was asked by friends to make the commitment numerous times after her diagnosis, she

waited until she was truly ready to immerse herself in the process.

"I admit I felt raw for a while and think I might have just wanted to hide from the fact it ever happened," said Sheller. "Now that I'm a part of The Women's Committee, however, it's been such a wonderful experience. Aside from our fundraising goals, the committee is able to put faces on the disease in many different ways, and help people affected by breast cancer feel more at home."

Sheller's involvement over the past decade has included a year as Chair of the organization and a separate term as Chair of Martha's Market. She continues to give her time and talents and is forthcoming with friends and strangers alike regarding her personal travels with cancer, in hopes the trip might be easier for women who follow.

At Martha Jefferson Hospital, we believe decisions regarding when to receive breast screenings should be made between a woman and her physician. The following is an excerpt from a statement made by the Martha Jefferson Cancer Committee.

"Our best advice for women in their 40's, particularly those at higher risk for breast cancer, is to undergo regular screening mammography. We also strongly advise all women age 50-74 years to undergo regular screening mammography, including the approximate 30 percent of women in this age group who have never had a screening mammogram. As always, we encourage all women to have conversations with their healthcare providers about a breast cancer screening strategy that best reflects their individual needs and concerns."

Free Breast Health Screening

April 24 – 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
Martha Jefferson Outpatient Care Center
595 Peter Jefferson Parkway

If you are over 40, uninsured or your insurance does not cover mammograms and cost is a concern, call today about our upcoming free Breast Health Screening Day. Appointments are limited – call today to see if you qualify for this free service made possible by the philanthropic efforts of The Women's Committee of Martha Jefferson Hospital and by our nurse practitioners and physicians who conduct this screening. This FREE screening includes a mammogram, self-exam instruction and a clinical breast exam. Free blood glucose and cholesterol level screening are also available.

**Call Health Connection at
(434) 654-7009 or 1-888-652-6663
for more information.**

Recent Women's Health Initiatives Made Possible by The Women's Committee

The Cancer Resource Center

Digital Mammography & Computer Assisted Detection

Stereotactic Breast Biopsy System

MRI Guided Imaging Breast Biopsy Equipment

Midlife Women's Health Services