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RACE FOR THE CURE Saturday West Palm Beach

## Breast cancer diagnosis a life lesson for Dreyfoos teacher, students

By STEVE DORFMAN Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Lea Jefferson spends her days teaching juniors and seniors at the Dreyfoos School of the Arts about economics and American history. But this school year, the most valuable lessons that the beloved 50-yearold instructor — known to students as “Miss J” — has imparted are unrelated to academia. No, they’re about real life.

That’s because, just after Labor Day, Jefferson learned she had breast cancer. This Saturday in downtown West Palm Beach, she’ll be one of the more inspirational — and unusual — participants in the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure: one who is doing so while undergoing aggressive breast-cancer treatment.

### Family history

Jefferson, who’s single and has no children of her own, is certainly familiar with the disease.

“My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 36, and had a recurrence at 46,” Jefferson says.

“My aunt — her sister — also had breast cancer, so I’ve been getting annual mammograms since my early 20s.”

She also had been diligent about undergoing regular breast MRIs. In fact, this is where the first of her life lessons is revealed: “Always trust your instincts.”

Jefferson explains that, because she’d had three consecutive “clear years” of MRIs, her insurance carrier didn’t want to pay for her to undergo another one in 2011.

“They thought it was unnecessary,” she recalls. “My physician’s office had to file a special appeal in order for me to get the test.”

And sure enough, that MRI was the one that detected her tumor.

Jefferson underwent a double mastectomy in October and began chemotherapy in December. She’ll eventually have extensive radiation treatment as well.

But herein lies another life lesson that Jefferson learned while watching her parents deal with her mother’s breast cancer: “Concentrate on, and be thankful for, what you have — not what you don’t.”

### Then and now

Among the things that Jefferson is thankful for are the remarkable advances — both societal and scientific — that have been made in breast-cancer medicine.

“As a child of the 1970s, I remember how primitive the treatments, and attitudes, were when my mother was a breast-cancer patient,” Jefferson says. “Back then, there were no prosthetic breast devices for women. My mother had to stuff a sock in her bra after her first mastectomy!”

What's more, the subject itself was considered taboo. Jefferson's parents, who were both schoolteachers, silently endured the hushed whispers and furtive stares of their colleagues and other acquaintances.

"People weren't mean about it, but they definitely weren't comfortable with it either," Jefferson explains.

Contrast that with the endless support that Jefferson says she has received from everyone in her personal and professional lives.

"My family and friends have been amazing. And everyone at Dreyfoos has been incredible — the students, the faculty, the administrators, the custodial staff. I've had students who aren't even in my classes come up to me and say, 'I want you to know, I'm praying for you, Miss J.'"

Jefferson has also been touched by the kindness she's received from complete strangers: "I've bonded with cancer survivors who recognize that I'm going through chemotherapy, while we're together in the checkout line at Publix."

She's also forever grateful to her oncologist, the world-renowned Dr. Elisabeth McKeen, and the entire staff at the Palm Beach Cancer Institute.

"I was first examined by Dr. McKeen on a Friday. She then called me at home on the following Sunday morning — less than two days later! — to explain to me the treatment plan she'd already worked out for me."

Thanks to McKeen's expertise — and the vast array of highly targeted chemotherapy drugs now available — Jefferson says that the only teaching days she's missed have been the ones when she's actually receiving her infusions.

"Unlike when my mother received radiation and chemotherapy, I haven't felt any nausea or sickness. Just some overwhelming fatigue a few days after each cycle, but that lasts only a day or two," she says.

Despite knowing that she's always at risk for a cancer recurrence, Jefferson never refers to her disease in negative terms such as an "ordeal," "battle" or "struggle."

Rather, she views the entire experience as "my journey — one that I'm determined to make the most of every day."

Seems we might all be able to learn a thing or two from Miss J.

@ steve\_dorfman@pbpost.com