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Keep on rolling on, biker babe

By SUSAN SWARTZ
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Nancy Bellen painted her bald head orange and stuck on a toilet paper roll colored green to turn herself into a pumpkin. That was early on, after getting over chemo treatments, when she wanted to balance the awfulness of cancer for her young son.

She told that as an example of "survival humor," in a newspaper report I did eight years ago on the new wave of breast cancer patients.

It was a gutsy step for women, to not only reveal their bald heads and mastectomy scars but make cancer jokes, a way of showing their solidarity and getting the public's attention to say, "OK, we need more research and better treatment for this crummy disease."

The headline writer used the words "cancer warrior" to describe this style of insistent visibility. "It was unusual then," says Bellen, "but now it's almost a stereotype to call us warriors and survivors."

Bold breast cancer survivors have even gone prime time — brassy Celia on "Weeds" and before her, Samantha on "Sex and the City."

It's paid off. Bellen remembers a doctor telling her that Sonoma County was once known as "bloody Sonoma" for its high number of radical mastectomies. That's no longer the case and part of it is due to Bellen and others warriors here and elsewhere building their loud and demanding army of advocates.

In addition to less invasive surgeries, there are better drugs, improved mammography and special breast cancer clinics like the Sutter Breast Care Center in Santa Rosa that consumer advocates like Bellen helped create. A 32-year-old documentary filmmaker expecting her second child when she was diagnosed, Bellen has been a big player in the breast cancer world for 10 years.

She's climbed mountains with other survivors, ridden bikes and rafted rivers. She's given speeches, created art for a breast cancer show that toured the world. She's even sold paintings to a pharmaceutical company. "How cool is that," she says.

It's also been 10 years of checking to make sure the cancer hasn't returned, including multiple biopsies and surgeries and so many mammograms she stopped counting at 40. When she was diagnosed she had to terminate her pregnancy and since has had a hysterectomy.

As a role model for life at the 10-year mark, she's one of the hardest — charismatic, energetic, funny and persuasive, even though she'd rather simply be known as an inventive artist and mother of a cool son. Frankly, she says, "I'm sick of my story, but I have to keep telling it."

She also says had she not gotten off "my radiated butt" in the very beginning and started making noise, "this thing would have crushed me."

Now she's doing something for the cause again, this time on a motorcycle. In jeans and motorcycle boots, blonde curls mashed by a pink striped helmet from a practice ride, she drank tea one morning and talked up the new black leathers she's getting, along with the Harley Dyna Low-Rider she'll ride up the California coast the last week in September.

She'll be one of 14 women, all diagnosed with breast cancer before age 40, to participate in the Amazon Heart Thunder ride from L.A. to San Francisco plus a loop through Wine Country. Funds raised through www.amazonheart.org will go to cancer programs for young women.

"We do these things for the ones who come behind us," says Bellen.

This time she'll be thinking of a friend hit with cancer in her 30s. The woman has a 8-year-old daughter, and Bellen imagines that both will feel a lot less scared about the future, cheering on 14 noisy, defiant babes on bikes.

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