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A labor of love: Couple spread the word about cancer

By Darla Carter • dcarter@courier-journal.com • February 11, 2010

After being diagnosed with ovarian cancer, educating others becomes a passion for some women — and their families.

Ann Miller and her husband, Bob, are among those who spread the word for Ovarian Awareness of Kentucky (O.A.K.), a support and resource organization for people affected by gynecologic cancers, such as ovarian cancer.

“My husband is very involved,” said Miller, who lives in Louisville. “We go to health fairs together, and he grabs the men and tells them” to talk to their female relatives about ovarian cancer. He also carries symptom cards “and he’s forever giving them out to women in different places.”

Miller, a retired nurse, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in June 2005, at age 62, after visiting several doctors to determine why she was having abdominal pain and other symptoms. Despite numerous tests, no one picked up on ovarian cancer until a trip to the emergency room for chest pain led to a CAT scan. “By then it was evident my belly was full of fluid and I had a large mass,” Miller said.

Today, she’s adamant that “women need to, first of all, know the symptoms,” she said. Also, it’s important to be persistent “because many doctors do not know the symptoms” or may not think of ovarian cancer as a possibility. “It has to be an astute physician.”

Miller and others with O.A.K. talk to medical students about their experiences and participate in O.A.K.’s Lunch & Learn program, where they go out to educate groups and tear down

misconceptions, such as that hysterectomies provide absolute protection.

“The term hysterectomy means just the removal of the uterus,” so “if you had just a hysterectomy and you maintain your ovaries, you can get ovarian cancer,” said Dr. Daniel Metzinger of UofL’s James Graham Brown Cancer Center. Also, “if you had a hysterectomy with both ovaries removed, you can still get a form of cancer called primary peritoneal carcinoma,” which acts like ovarian cancer.

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