

Finding Courage to Speak Out

Debbie First says that when she had ovarian cancer in 1977, the word “cancer” was rarely said out loud.

“I did not want to believe I had cancer, and most people didn’t want to hear about it,” she recalls. “It was too frightening. Talking about the type of cancer I had would be like saying I might die.”

Instead, she said she had a tumor on her ovary or that she had a teratoma, the name for the rare cancer she had.

First, a public relations and marketing professional, says that when she was diagnosed in 1977, her own personal style, combined with the climate of the times, kept her from speaking openly. Even though her husband and small group of friends formed an informal group to listen to her whenever she needed it, First recalls, “My ability to deny took over. Maybe if I didn’t say cancer, I didn’t have it.”

Last fall, she spoke publicly about her cancer for the first time at an event sponsored by Dana-Farber Cancer Institute’s Susan F. Smith Center for Women’s Cancers.

First described being a mother of three and a successful public relations and marketing executive living in Weston, Mass., when, in her 30s, she was found to have a malignant mass on one ovary. At the time, there was no precedent for treating her cancer, and she called it a miracle that she found Dana-Farber physician David Livingston, MD, who recommended a treatment protocol based on one that had been effective in treating testicular cancer in men under age 25. She had a full hysterectomy and 13 months of chemotherapy at Dana-Farber and was sick from the treatments. When she went to work, people assumed she had breast cancer because that was the only women’s cancer anyone knew about.

“The only name I associated with ovarian cancer was comedienne Gilda Radner, and she died,” she told the audience.

First also explained how she built her strength

back by walking and hitting tennis balls with her husband, Bob. She also began cycling and eventually in 1995 rode the 192-mile Pan Massachusetts Challenge with him, wearing an “I am Living Proof” pin. She crossed the finish line holding his hand high, tears streaming down her face.

Her involvement in Dana-Farber’s Susan F. Smith Center for Women’s Cancers helped her open up to herself and to others. Her decision to speak publicly grew out of her realization that a generation of younger people don’t know about the strides made in treating cancer and a new climate that welcomes patients talking openly about it.

“Telling my story of surviving ovarian cancer offers hope,” she says. “Today, there is no reason not to talk about it. There are many good stories, and more coming.”



Photo: Aaron Washington

Debbie First (second from right), with her husband, Bob, and their two daughters, Liz (left) and Pam.