

# Raising awareness for cancer



Teri Heckert

## Psychology professor battles breast cancer, raises awareness

BY BETHANY BOYLE  
Staff Reporter

A Truman State professor living with breast cancer — after being diagnosed a second time — is doing her part to spread the word and raise awareness this October.

Psychology professor Teri Heckert said she has been working to raise breast cancer awareness among her students during recent months as she

faces the disease for the second time. She said she recently has delivered presentations for various campus organizations such as Alpha Sigma Gamma and Sigma Kappa and has spoken briefly about her story to students attending her classes.

"[I] didn't have time for cancer, but it had time for me," Heckert said. She prefaces the story of her first battle against breast cancer with these words.

A mother of two, Heckert said she begins every talk the same way, by dedicating it to her kids — "For Diana and Eric."

Finding her initial tumor during April 2011, Heckert said it was a scary time for her family. Her children were in second and fourth grade, her husband was working out of state, and Heckert was serving as chair of the psychology department at the time.

Heckert said she continued to teach and fulfill her Department Chair responsibilities throughout the treatments. She underwent two surgeries, where doctors removed 22 of her lymph nodes, Heckert said. Eight cycles of chemotherapy and six weeks of radiation later, after losing her hair and enduring the pain and nausea that

accompanies those treatment processes, Heckert said she was declared cancer-free November 2011. She said she then went two years with follow-up tests, and everything looked fine.

Following a routine mammogram last May, Heckert said she was worried about a new sensation of tightness near the scarring from her surgeries, but the results of the test showed she was clear. After finding a cancerous lump on her back this July, Heckert said scans revealed the breast cancer had returned and now is in her bones.

She said this type of cancer is called metastatic breast cancer. The cancer has left the breast and is the form for which there is no cure, only treatment. She said the most common places for it to progress are the lungs, liver, bones and brain.

Heckert said this news prompted her to step down from the department chair position, although she continued to teach.

Heckert said her crusade for prevention and awareness largely stems from the knowledge that the disease has become increasingly prevalent during recent years, and she said people don't realize how often those

diagnosed don't have history of breast cancer in their family.

During her presentations, Heckert said she usually explains some of the things people experience when they have breast cancer, and how to show support for those suffering from cancer. She said with chemotherapy there is pain, nausea and weakness. Radiation usually entails what Heckert described as "a very bad sunburn." But even by describing the treatment symptoms, Heckert said she keeps her optimism.

"You survive," Heckert said. "I don't like it when people get awkward with me after they learn that I have breast cancer. I'm not dying. I'm living with cancer and I intend to live a very long time."

Sophomore Elizabeth Rehfeldt is in Heckert's Motivation and Emotion class, and heard her speak at a meeting for Sigma Kappa. She said she had no idea Heckert was battling breast cancer again.

Rehfeldt said Heckert hasn't let cancer affect her class and has stayed dedicated to teaching through her illness.

Rehfeldt said Heckert's message about prevention and

awareness was a wake-up call to start talking about cancer with family and friends. She said she now thinks about whether her loved ones are taking appropriate measures, such as yearly checkups, to take care of themselves.

"It made me realize how fragile we are," Rehfeldt said. "And it's made me view Dr. Heckert as much more resilient and strong-willed. She is so positive about the whole experience."

Junior Katie Mohan, another of Heckert's students, said she heard Heckert speak at a breast cancer awareness event for service sorority Alpha Sigma Gamma. Mohan said she thought the positive and lighthearted way Heckert presented her situation was amazing.

Mohan said Heckert gives her hope. If Heckert can remain strong, Mohan said she thinks other women can be strong, too.

"It's uplifting to see her positive attitude," Mohan said. "She doesn't want anyone to pity her. She says, 'You can be my cheerleader, or just keep rooting for me, or [be] on my dance team. You can even be in my band, but don't give me pity.' I just thought that was awesome."



For the most part, I've stopped feeling like a tourist. When I say this, I mean I don't stick out like a sore thumb anymore. I know which button to push to exit the bus, the general layout of the city and I can even get through the day without fearing at any moment someone could come up to me and ask a question. I even gave another student directions the other day — although I found out later they actually were terrible directions. I can still count that, right?

The point is I've settled into life here. I'm passing fewer and fewer milestones, and the days are starting to run together. The

novelty of life in France perhaps has started to wear off. It happened slowly but surely. Part of me is glad I don't have to wander around like a lost puppy anymore, but the other part of me misses the excitement I would experience just waking up and looking out my window. I used to feel oddly ashamed of myself. I felt too American. I desired to fit in, to assimilate and to change myself. But is it really worth it? An experience I had last weekend made me question my decisions to try to blend in.

My soccer team had a game in a nearby town, much smaller than Besançon,

where I am staying. As we drove farther and farther away from the city, the countryside became more prevalent. It actually was like being in Missouri. But there was one difference — mountains.

Being from Springfield, Mo., I'm used to living on a plateau. Everything is pretty flat. Sure, I'm from the Ozarks, so I've seen my fair share of hilly areas, but no real mountains. Besançon is at the foot of the Jura Mountains in the Haut-Doubs region. While the city itself isn't what I'd call mountainous, there are some nearby areas that are, including the little town we visited to play our game.

Upon entering the city, I got to see the faces of some of the smaller mountains, and my jaw dropped. Since I carpooled with some of the other players, they gauged my reactions and thought it was quite hilarious, thinking it was funny something so ordinary for them was exotic for me.

As we approached the soccer fields, I realized our field was in the middle of it all. Sprawling hills decorated with picture-perfect houses surrounded us on all sides. And get this — there was even a chateau that rested on top of a nearby hill

overlooking the field.

Although it isn't comparable to being in the Swiss Alps, I'm sure, it was still a moment of culture shock. I immediately reverted back into my old touristy self and indulged in taking a few pictures, even though I knew it would cost me a few odd looks and muffled laughs.

I was happy to experience wonder again, and I invite those emotions back anytime. Sure, it's nice not feeling like an oddball, but it's even nicer to openly experience something like that without fearing judgement. I snapped a few pictures and asked about the chateau and the nearby Catholic church, happy to be learning about the natives and their culture. What was ordinary to them was extraordinary to me. I think it's important we remind ourselves of that. It's too easy to get wrapped up in our daily lives and these types of experiences are all around us. We just have to stop fearing judgement. It's okay to feel a little uncomfortable.

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