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-- October 6, 2021 --

# SURVIVING BREAST CANCER

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## **Westphalia-Native Sisters Survive Breast Cancer**

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## **Bonnie Ford beats the odds considering family history**

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# Westphalia-Native Sisters Survive Breast Cancer

BY NEAL A. JOHNSON  
UD EDITOR  
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Westphalia natives Rhonda Kloepfel, 50, and her sister, Linda Tobar, 58, have survived breast cancer. On average, one in eight women, or 12%, are diagnosed with breast cancer each year. That figure nearly doubles among siblings, according to the American Cancer Society.

Overcoming the disease relied on early detection, quick action, and immense support from friends and loved ones.

Kloepfel's experience was frightening but brought the family together even more, and helped Tobar when her diagnosis came nearly two years later.

"My fears and concerns were easier to deal with since Rhonda had already gone through it," said Tobar, who retired from teaching just before her diagnosis. "She gave me questions to ask the doctor and helped explain the situation. It made things less worrisome."

Kloepfel now lives in Eureka, where she teaches eighth-grade History and leads the Social Studies department at LaSalle Springs Middle School.

A mixed bag of emotions came with Kloepfel's diagnosis.

On Jan. 4, 2018, her husband, Brad, bought hockey tickets for the family to celebrate her birthday.

"It was my present," said Kloepfel. "I was sporting my new Steen jersey that Brad bought me for Christmas. It was a great night of hockey filled with laughter with our kids even though I do think we lost. It was a fun evening but it had a dark shadow over it as news about my biopsy should be coming the next day."

That fun evening of great family memories clashed with the news Kloepfel received the next day when she was diagnosed with Stage 3 Invasive Lobular Carcinoma, a more rare type of breast cancer.

"Hearing the word cancer was like listening to Charlie Brown's teacher," she said. "I heard carcinoma and didn't hear another word she said. I called Brad to share the



**SUBMITTED PHOTO**  
LINDA TOBAR, left, and her sister, Rhonda Kloepfel, traveled to Germany, Prague, and Italy before they were diagnosed with breast cancer.

news and he asked me all the questions one would want to know when told they have cancer. I couldn't answer any of them. I remember going home and going straight to the internet after calling the nurse navigator back asking for all the specifics."

When her husband arrived at home later and hugged her, Kloepfel said her first words were, "I'm scared."

Behind the words were dark thoughts. "Was I going to die?" Kloepfel wondered. "What does this mean for my daughter's future medically? Would I lose my hair? Will the cancer come back?"

She said what cancer does is take away your peace of mind. "Will I find out at this doctor appointment that the cancer is back?" Kloepfel thought. "That was my biggest fear. The nurse said it was beatable, the internet said 95 percent survival rate of five years or more but that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted a guarantee that cancer wouldn't beat me. I wanted to know that I would have a life where I would get to watch my kids get married and start their families, not one where I worried if or when my cancer would come back."

Kloepfel told her team of students the next week since she would be absent the rest of the school year once she started treatment. "They sent me cards of encouragement throughout my treatment," she added.

The first few weeks were a blur of friends coming by with gift cards and cancer "necessities."

"Family members hugged me a bit longer, friends gave the sympathy head tilt with 'how are you? I heard,' co-workers tried to spoil me with gifts daily until it was time for me

See **Sisters** on Page 3B

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THIS POSTER hung in Rhonda Kloepfel's classroom for her students while she was absent.

**Sisters • from page 2B**

to take a leave of absence. I would be stepping away from a job that I loved and kids that I would miss for the next four months while I went through treatment.”

The next few weeks held a lot of doctor appointments. “I had to learn a whole new vocabulary to understand each doctor,” Kloepfel said. “I quickly became an expert on the common words of breast cancer like HER-2 negative,

estrogen positive, invasive lobular, mastectomy, the ‘Red Devil’ in chemo, tamoxifen, lymphedema, radiation, and reconstruction. I had hard decisions to make and I needed to talk about it. I spent time trying to keep my family and friends informed as to how I was doing.”

She added that it was easier to talk about the treatment plan and not all the emotions and decisions that were overwhelming her.

“They didn’t understand the language of breast cancer, and thankfully, most of them didn’t personally know what hearing the word ‘cancer’ felt like,” Kloepfel said of those who meant well. “People would say to me with the best intentions ‘you should be thankful to be alive’ but I was bitter that that had to be my new way of thinking. The day before I wasn’t just lucky to be alive, I had a whole future in front of me that didn’t involve cancer.”

People would say positive phrases like, “You got this and you are so strong,” even though Kloepfel said she wasn’t sure that was true. “So I felt very alone, even though I had a huge support team,” she added. “I had the most supportive husband (and best nurse), who took detailed notes and became my ears at every doctor appointment. I had a teenage daughter who just wanted to see me be happy again and a son at college who really did not want to talk about his mom’s breasts. I had my parents, five sisters, and a brother (who learned a lot about his sister’s body) all ready to help out. I had an angel brother looking out for me. I had my ‘besties,’ my posse, and my friends at work, along with my 135 eighth-grade students wishing me the best, as well as a community of support everywhere I turned — and yet I felt alone.”

Kloepfel’s sister-in-law, who has metastatic cancer provided the best advice early in the journey: “One Day at a time,” but Kloepfel said she didn’t know how to accept all these new aspects of her life.

“I became overwhelmed with emotions that would leave me crying in the car or shower to hide my sadness and hopelessness from my kids and husband,” she added.

About a month after she was diagnosed, Brad told Rhonda about the Cancer Support Community Center.

“There, I found a support group that felt like I was sitting in a room with my aunts, mom, and sisters,” she said. “It wasn’t an easy group to be a part of as several women have metastatic breast cancer. Hearing their stories was hard. It was a future I didn’t want but they understood my tears. They had the same fears — fear that I would feel terrible during chemo, fear of radiation and reconstruction, fear I wasn’t strong enough, and fear the cancer would come back.

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

RHONDA KLOEPFEL, right, is shown with her husband, Brad, son, Brendan, and daughter, Emily

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“They understood the effects of the medicine and the hopelessness I felt during chemo,” Kloepfel continued. “They got how hard it was to make the tough decisions that go with breast cancer. They understood my grieving over the loss of my old body. They knew this would sound superficial to some but it was profound for me as I no longer felt like me. I didn’t recognize myself anymore and these women understood that. Here were people battling so many different cancers coming together to support one another.”

All of that support gave Kloepfel a solid foundation as she prepared for surgery.

Ultimately, she had a double mastectomy and 28 lymph nodes were removed. After about four weeks of recovery, Kloepfel began chemotherapy.

“Doctors felt that they got good margins and got it all,” she said. “Recovery from the reconstruction was much more difficult due to complications.”

Kloepfel explained the reconstruction did not go as planned, which resulted in a deep inferior epigastric perforators (DIEP) flap procedure in which doctors used skin and fat from the abdomen to recreate breasts. “I had complications from the first surgery and had to have a second surgery,” she added. “I will still need one more surgery but have just given myself some time to heal for a while.”

Kloepfel underwent a total of eight chemo treatments, followed by 28 rounds of radiation. “I took off school the first week of February to do treatment,” she said, noting her sisters and besties accompanied her to chemo treatments. “I returned to school in August while still doing the radiation treatments. To make things a little lighter, I wore bright-colored wigs of blue, pink, purple to school each day until my hair started to come back. My students enjoyed seeing which wig color I would wear each day.”

Her family provided a lot of positive emotions. “They were unbelievably supportive, even wearing hats and scarves to make me feel better with my new look,” said Kloepfel of her husband, Brad, and children, Brendan, 25, and Emily, 20. “The night I started losing a lot of hair, they helped shave my head. They enjoyed that a lot! It made it less emotional and more of a funny event.”

Kloepfel will take medication for 10 years.

Nearly two years after Kloepfel’s diagnosis — in October 2019 — Tobar learned she had a suspicious lump that required additional tests.

“I have been faithful with my yearly mammograms,” said Tobar. “During my exam at Capital Region that they found a lump and wanted to do an ultrasound. In the middle of that test the tech called in the doctor because there was a second lump.”

Two biopsies were conducted. The first lump, the one identified by the mammogram, was non-cancerous but the second contained cancerous cells.

“That’s why you take additional tests,” said Tobar. “If they hadn’t done the ultrasound, that second lump would have kept growing and it may not have been detected for another year when I had my next mammogram.”

There was a history of breast cancer in the family, with two aunts on Kloepfel and Tobar’s father’s side having

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RHONDA KLOEPFEL is shown with a large group of supporters.



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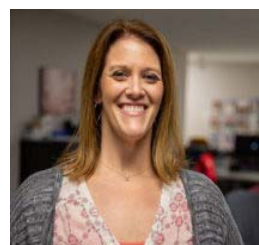
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**Sisters • from page 4B**



**SUBMITTED PHOTO**

**BREAST CANCER** survivor Linda Tobar enjoys spending time with her son and his family, Jordan, Megan, and their daughters Harper and Ruby Tobar, and her daughter and her fiancé, Danielle Tobar and Ryan Wilmes.

dealt with the disease.

When Tobar received the news, she was more stunned than afraid but there was a concern because of what Kloeppel had endured.

“Her situation was much worse than mine,” said Tobar. “They caught mine early, which was a good thing, but it was still months before they took chemo off the table as a possible treatment.”

Tobar, who taught for 26 years at Lewis & Clark Middle School in Jefferson City, had retired a couple of months before her diagnosis. “I was lucky,” she said, noting she did not feel the need for a second opinion because of her faith in the doctors at Capital Region. “The timing was just about perfect because I didn’t have to worry about job stress and I had surgery without COVID going on at the time.”

New testing enabled doctors at Goldschmidt Cancer Center in Jefferson City to determine that Tobar had a slow-growing tumor. “That was the best news,” she said. “The odds it would spread were low as were the odds it would come back. That was great news too.”

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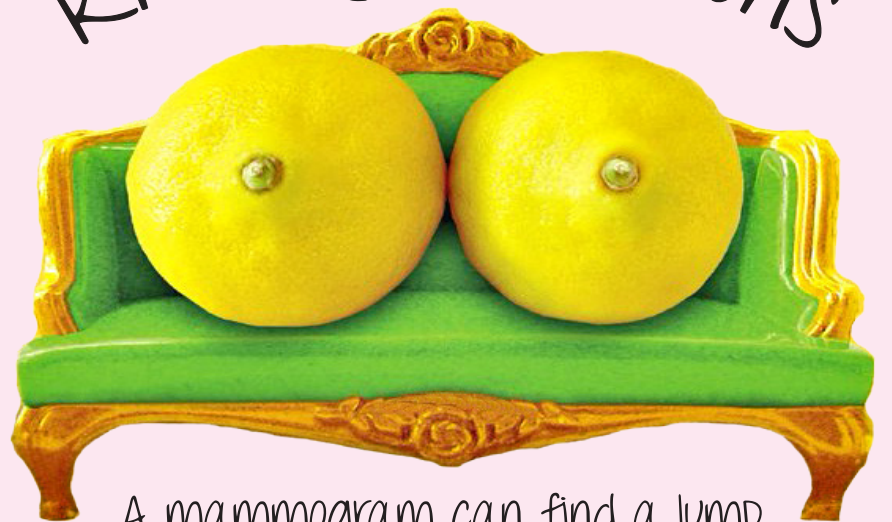
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# Ford Beats the Odds Considering Family History

BY NEAL A. JOHNSON  
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Bonnie Ford, 43, of Linn and formerly of Chamois, knew that because of her family history, cancer was something she would have to consider, and when the day came that she was diagnosed with breast cancer, she was distraught.

"I lost it," she said of the day in July of 2019 that word came from her doctor that she had the disease. "I had to work that day and after I left the doctor's office, I just sat in

my car and cried for a while. Then I pulled myself together and went to work."

Ford's mother survived breast cancer 10 years ago and beat it with a lumpectomy. "We lost her to brain cancer in 2016," said Ford. "My dad is battling throat cancer, so our family seems to be predisposed to cancer for some reason. I'm trying to get my brother, Ray, to get checked out."

Until she went to JCMG Clinic in Linn to have a rash on her lip examined, Ford had not been much on self-exams because of her physiology. "I have lumps anyway and I've had several biopsies in the past and all of them were negative," she said.

Ford's first biopsy was conducted when she was 22 and several others followed.

"The pain and the bills were things I didn't want," she said. During this visit, however, she was told a mammogram was in order because of her family history.

This time, the exam showed significant changes, which led to another biopsy.

"More mammograms after that," Ford said. "I had a lot of doctor appointments and an MRI. They wanted to know how bad it was."

By the end of August 2019, doctors were ready to operate. "It was a complicated situation," Ford said. "My daughter was getting married and I didn't want to miss it."

At this point, Ford had only told her best friend but her daughter, Savannah, was set to be married to Zach Davis on a Friday, and Ford's surgery was scheduled for the following Thursday, just ahead of Chamois Day.

"I had to tell my daughter and my brother what was going on because they were the people I was most worried about,"

said Ford.

Despite the knowledge that Ford was preparing to undergo surgery, the wedding went off without a hitch. "It was a beautiful day and I'm so glad for that," Ford said.

Following the wedding, the next several days went by in a blur. "Everything moved fast," said Ford. "There was no time to think about anything. The doctors had already done all the tests and had everything ready. I had to tell my boss about the situation because I would need time off for recovery."

Ford underwent a double-mastectomy and doctors checked her lymph nodes, which proved to be non-cancerous.

"They got it all," said Ford. "I have to take medication for three more years but fortunately, I didn't need chemotherapy."

Ford had other considerations once doctors assured her that the breast cancer had been removed.

"I wanted reconstructive surgery," said Ford. "I made that decision mainly because I was single and I wanted to feel like a woman. I thought it would be an easy situation but nope. It was very challenging."

Spacers were put in place and filled with air to allow the skin to stretch for a couple of weeks ahead of the reconstruction.

"The doctor asked me what size breasts I wanted to have and I told him to make them the same size I had before the surgery," said Ford. "I have a small fortune in Victoria's Secret and didn't want to buy new stuff."

Ford said the reconstruction was painful. "They used a fat graft to fill in the gaps and it hurt," she said. "Also, drain tubes suck."

Four additional operations were required to finally com-

See **Ford** on Page 7B



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**Ford • from page 6B**

plete the process. Ford developed a seroma, a pocket of clear fluid under the implant. “Fortunately, there was no infection,” she said. “I consider myself lucky.”

She still has some physical discomfort at times and limitations on movement. “It hurts when I stretch so I have to do it slowly,” Ford said. “I just need to heal.”

Her final surgery was in May of this year, and Ford said she is feeling pretty good.

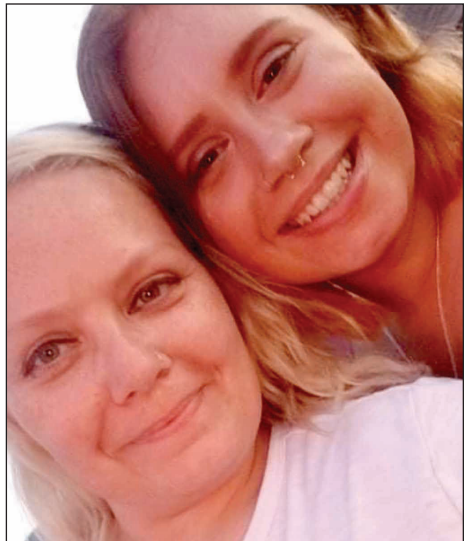


**SUBMITTED PHOTO**

“I do feel susceptible to other forms of cancer but I’m more concerned for my daughter,” said Ford. “Did I pass something along to her genetically? Hopefully, she won’t have to go through this but I’ve learned a lot and I’m sharing everything with her.”

Ford added she is very happy to have survived the ordeal, and loves spending time with her grandson, Noah, 3.

She credits early detection for the outcome. “That’s the key,” Ford said. “Self-exams and mammograms could be the difference between catching it in time for doctors to help and finding yourself too far gone.”



**SUBMITTED PHOTO**

**BONNIE FORD** said she is most worried about the future health of her daughter, Savannah Davis, considering the family history of cancer.

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**Sisters • from page 5B**

Three months after testing, while there was still some fear, Tobar said she knew it would be easier to handle than what her sister endured.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

**RHONDA KLOEPEL** and her family went on a camping trip at which everyone wore bandannas with her in solidarity.

“She was very excited for me,” said Tobar. “She didn’t want me to go through it and there were a lot of tears when we found out what I needed to do.”

A lumpectomy was the procedure doctors pursued. “In the old days, if they found a lump they just did a mastectomy but now they can tell more accurately if you need that,” Tobar said.

There were no complications during the surgery and Tobar said the recovery process was relatively easy, with little pain.

Tobar said her family has been very supportive. “They took turns staying with me after the procedure and went to the doctors with me so we always had two people listening to what was said.”

Following the procedure, Tobar underwent radiation treatments and will take medication for five years but the situation is under control.

“It all looks good,” said Tobar. “The last radiation checkup showed things have healed well.”

Kloeppe and Tobar have four sisters and a brother, with another brother who passed away a few years ago.

“All of our sisters have paid attention,” said Tobar. “A couple of them are on higher watch, with more testing.”

Alternating MRIs and mammograms every six months are keeping the sisters in good health, and genetic testing showed nothing but there is probably a predisposition for cancer, Tobar noted. Kloeppe did not have the gene associated with breast cancer.

“I’m worried about my daughter,” said Tobar of Danielle Tobar, 30. “She knows

she must stay vigilant and do monthly self checks.”

Tobar’s son, Jordan, has two daughters, aged 3 and nine months. “They won’t have to worry about this for a while but my granddaughters will be on high alert,” she said.

Overall, Tobar said she’s happy with Capital Region Medical Center and Goldschmidt Cancer Center. “The doctors were very professional and caring,” she said. “Everyone was supportive and provided a calming environment.”

Kloeppe and Tobar agree that early detection is extremely important in the fight against breast cancer.

“Our hope is that our stories can help others be proactive for their own health,” they said. “Knowing your body, getting yearly mammograms, and talking with your doctor when something doesn’t feel right could help reduce the number of deaths due to breast cancer.”



SUBMITTED PHOTO

**LINDA TOBAR**, left, and her sister, Rhonda Kloeppe, traveled to Germany, Prague, and Italy before they were diagnosed with breast cancer.



# Breast cancer

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