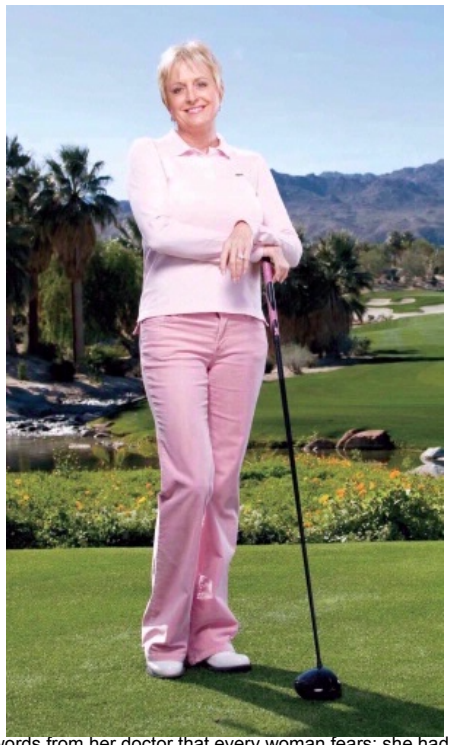
Behind a Miracle

By: Betty Wolf



In February 2005, at the age of 48, Selby Dunham heard words from her doctor that every woman fears: she had invasive ductal carcinoma, Stage III, breast cancer. Now, she was sitting in the office of Eisenhower oncologist Luke Dreisbach, MD, discussing an aggressive course of treatment to bring her back to health. “She had that instant desire to fight this disease,” recalls Dr. Dreisbach. “There wasn’t much hesitation.”

“When there are multiple lymph nodes involved, we recommend chemotherapy,” explains Dr. Dreisbach. “The main reason for chemotherapy is to kill stray cells in the body, but it will also shrink a tumor, which makes the surgery easier for the patient, as well as the surgeon. Shrinking the tumor also allows for the possible option of a lumpectomy or a mastectomy.”

“Selby was an ideal patient in that she asked all the right questions,” says Dreisbach. And, her attitude was ‘I’m going to beat this.’”

Dr. Dreisbach recommended that Selby start chemotherapy immediately to shrink the tumor, and then to have surgery. He recommended that after surgery, Selby have radiation to kill any remaining cancer cells, and then hormone therapy.

Selby had complete confidence in the Eisenhower team, but like many patients she says she’s learned the importance of being her own health care advocate, and decided to check with other physicians to be sure she was following the right course of treatment.

“I spoke with Dr. John Glaspy at University of California, Los Angeles, who I recently saw again on the “Stand Up to Cancer” special; I spoke to physicians at City of Hope. Everyone told me that the treatment recommended by Dr. Dreisbach and the team at Eisenhower was exactly the right course of therapy,” Selby says. “Sometimes residents in the Valley may wonder whether we can compete with the big hospitals in Los Angeles, but I learned firsthand that with Eisenhower, we have the best experts in the world right here—they are truly on the cutting edge of medicine.”

Confident in her choices, Selby began chemotherapy immediately, and the tumor shrank from 7 centimeters to 4 centimeters. After four months, Selby elected to have a modified radical mastectomy, which was performed by Eisenhower surgeon Peter Schulz, MD. Then, beginning in September, Selby had six weeks of radiation treatments at the Eisenhower BIGHORN Radiation Oncology Center. Today, four years after completing her treatment, Selby is cancerfree.

“The people and the doctors at Eisenhower saved my life,” Selby says. “Quite simply, I would not be here today without them.”

Selby is an avid golfer, who for many years played in amateur competitions throughout the country. Now, she prefers to stay closer to home, playing at BIGHORN Golf Club every chance she gets. Looking for a way to give back to the Eisenhower BIGHORN Radiation Oncology Center and the Eisenhower Schnitzer/Novack Breast Center, Selby decided to combine her love of golf with her desire to support Eisenhower and its staff. With help and encouragement from BIGHORN chairman R. D. Hubbard, Selby established BIGHORN Behind A Miracle (BAM) golf tournament, which is dedicated to providing funds to help in the diagnosis, treatment, research and education of those affected by breast cancer in the Coachella Valley.

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“Behind A Miracle is about women getting together and having fun, while at the same time raising critical resources dedicated to diagnosing and treating breast cancer,” Selby says. “I was so moved by the help and support I received from the people at BIGHORN and Eisenhower who helped me get through this ordeal that I really wanted to do something to help ensure other women would have the same wonderful experience I did.”

In 2008, BIGHORN BAM held its inaugural golf tournament, which raised more than $316,000 for the Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center. Proceeds from the tournament enabled the Eisenhower Schnitzer/Novack Breast Center to purchase cutting edge ultrasound equipment and a mammography imaging CD burner, which provides breast cancer patients with digital copies of their mammogram images. The BIGHORN Radiation Oncology Center used funds from BAM to invest in new diagnostic equipment, and to offer door-todoor transportation to patients in need undergoing daily radiation treatments.

“We were absolutely thrilled that Selby and the BAM tournament committee chose to support Eisenhower with the proceeds from their event,” says Joan Randall, RN, MS, Executive Director, Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center. “Their donation supports our physicians’ and staffs’ goal to provide the most up-to-date technology and a warm, healing environment for our patients—qualities that are so important to women facing breast cancer treatment or awaiting a diagnosis.”

The BIGHORN Behind a Miracle tournament is now an annual event. The 2009 activities kick off with a special benefactors party on March 13, sponsored by Sullivan’s Steakhouse. The golf tournament will be held on April 23 at the BIGHORN Canyons golf course. Festivities begin the night before with the Cash for Caddies Auction, hosted by the R.D. & Joan Dale Hubbard Foundation the evening of April 22 (information on the tournament is available at www.bighornbam.com).

Selby says that her bout with breast cancer has changed her life forever.

“Getting breast cancer was a blessing in my life,” Selby says. “I used to be so hard and rushed. I used to worry about things that were pointless, now I focus on the things that matter—family, friends. It has brought me softness. I think that I have been richly, richly blessed.”

Selby has been married for the past three years to Curt Dunham, who was with her when she was first diagnosed, and has been by her side ever since. The couple lives in BIGHORN and have three children between them—a son, Travis, who is 28, and two daughters,Whitney, 22, and Jessica, 20.

“Curt has been my rock,” Selby said.“He has been with me every step of the way, through the chemo, through surgery, and through weeks and weeks of radiation treatments. He never missed an appointment, never lost his optimism.”

Selby says that Curt and the people around her made sure she never lost hope.

“I was overwhelmed by the love, generosity, and support I received from my friends and family. Until you go through something like this, you don’t really understand how remarkable this community is. I was surrounded by people who went out of their way to make sure I always had everything I needed. I will never forget it.”

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