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Reading cancer survivor an inspiration to Latinas

Reina Mancini, who reaches out to other women about the disease, is honored by a research foundation.

By Erin Negley
Reading Eagle

Reina Mancini had scheduled an appointment for a mammogram, but the hustle and bustle of life got in the way.

Work and family obligations filled Mancini's life, and she forgot about making an appointment until a year later after she noticed a lump on her left breast.



At Reading Hospital, doctors discovered cancer spreading to her lymph nodes.

Mancini and her husband and their two children had moved from Uruguay a few years earlier and settled in Reading.

She was in a new country, still learning English and did not have medical insurance.

Mancini found an ally in the Daniel Torres Hispanic Center's Latina Breast Care Program.

Staff drove her to appointments, translated for her and helped her connect with the hospital's assistance program, which funded her treatment.

In February, after more than a year of radiation, chemotherapy and a mastectomy, Mancini's cancer was declared in remission. As a survivor, she has become an advocate for breast cancer awareness.

The Philadelphia affiliate of Susan G. Komen for the Cure honored Mancini with a survivor award in April. The cancer research foundation recognized 35 women in the greater Philadelphia region.

The award is presented to inspiring women who volunteer with the Komen foundation's partner hospitals and agencies, such as the Latina Breast Care Program.

Throughout her treatment, Mancini gave back to the program by talking to other survivors and encouraging women to get mammograms.

"She's an inspiration for the Latino community," said Lourdes V. Kahl, coordinator of the Hispanic Center breast care program.

Mancini talks about cancer on BCTV and on local radio to try to reach women like her.

She also has been instrumental in the success of a survivors group run by Latina Breast Care Program.

At the May meeting, she played several folk songs on an accordion with her daughter, Daniela, accompanying her on guitar. Between stories of cancer treatment and diagnosis, the women in the group sang along.

Kahl has heard stories such as Mancini's over and over.

Breast cancer is the most frequently diagnosed cancer among nearly every racial and ethnic group in the U.S., including black and Latino women, according to the Komen foundation.

"Some Latinas, they're kind of shy. They're afraid of going to the doctor and getting checked," Mancini said in Spanish. "That's why it's very important to go to the doctor and get a mammogram."

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Commonality found in illness, language

When Diana E. Rivera-O'Bryant battled cancer a few years ago, she searched for a group that would understand her symptoms, her worries and her experience.

She found a few support groups, but none of them was the right fit.

"I tried to go to one or two support groups, where I found I was the only African-American/Latina person there," said Rivera-O'Bryant, the former head of Reading's Human Relations Commission. "I kind of felt uncomfortable and a little uneasy."

Two years ago, she learned that the Daniel Torres Hispanic Center's Latina Breast Care Program was starting a support group. She has attended the bilingual monthly meetings ever since.

"I thought that this was a good opportunity to network with other women who are going through the same thing, going through chemo treatments, radiation, losing your hair and so many of the emotions that you deal with," Rivera-O'Bryant said. "It has been a tremendous support for me to know that I can be here with my sisters, that we have that commonality that we all share that experience."

The group, funded by Susan G. Komen for the Cure, a breast cancer research

foundation, is the only bilingual breast cancer support group in Berks County.

"They feel more comfortable speaking their own language," said Lourdes V. Kahl, who coordinates the program.

Kahl sometimes invites speakers, but mostly the women spend the time talking about their experiences and how they're feeling. They tell their stories, encourage one another and exchange phone numbers.

The women, who range in age from 32 to 74, are in different stages of their treatment, but they share common bonds.

"It's OK to say 'I felt so sick,' and I can't explain that to my family. I can say that here," Rivera-O'Bryant said. "They're dealing with the same issues that I'm dealing with."

Targeting cancer

In 2007, the Daniel Torres Hispanic Center's Latina Breast Care Program:

- Worked with 3,500 clients.
- Coordinated 1,200 breast cancer screenings.
- Facilitated 700 mammograms.
- Learned six women in the program were diagnosed with cancer.

Source: Lourdes V. Kahl, program coordinator

Monthly meeting

The Latina Breast Care Program's bilingual support group meets every third Thursday from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. in the Daniel Torres Hispanic Center, 501 Washington St., Reading. The group is open to all women with breast cancer.