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Gathering Place helps Fairview Park woman find 'the new normal'

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Katie Geiger of Fairview Park and her daughter, Claire, spend some time together.

Katie Geiger didn't realize just how much her first mammogram would change her life.

It was at that screening in February 2010, just after her 40th birthday, that Geiger found out she had breast cancer.

"It was a whirlwind of emotions," said the Fairview Park resident. "No one ever expects to get that diagnosis."

Adding to those emotions was the fact that

Geiger was adopted, which made it difficult to find out important information about whether genetic factors could play a role. She decided to seek out her biological mother.

It was too much of a confusing and difficult time to try to begin any type of relationship with her biological mother, Geiger said, adding that she did learn important health information by reaching out. The woman had been diagnosed with breast cancer a year before Geiger was and several other family members had it, as well.

"It was obvious that I was genetically disposed," Geiger said. "They treated me aggressively because of that."

She decided to play it safe and had both breasts removed in a bilateral mastectomy. She also went through chemotherapy for months because the cancer had already spread to her lymph system. It was an emotionally trying year as she underwent treatment, and it left her tired most of the time.

As traumatic as the experience has been, Geiger said she gets comfort from being open and talking about the disease. But one of the most difficult moments of the experience was when she realized the impact her illness was having on her 9-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter. She first made this realization when her daughter couldn't sleep because of nightmares.

"My kids were worried about whether or not they were going to have a mom," she said.

Self-described as strong, Geiger felt that she was getting by mentally and emotionally without any sort of therapy. But she didn't think the same could be said about her children.

"I'm in my 40s. Dealing with mortality is one thing, but for kids, it's a whole other mindset," she said.

She took her children to a facility she had heard of called The Gathering Place, which offers free support in various forms for adults and children affected by cancer.

Geiger described the center as a non-threatening environment where her kids were able to participate in things like crafts and gym activities and meet other kids who might be going through similar experiences. "I can't say enough about The Gathering Place," she said.

"They (my kids) are busy kids, they have a lot of activities, they play sports, but they clear their schedule as much as they can to go to these sessions."

Geiger has noticed a difference in her children since they've been attending.

"They're more comfortable with talking to me about what's going on," she said, adding, "I was curious to know how much they would even open up with something like this. It's amazing to see what they come home and tell me."

Chemotherapy ended last December and, while Geiger said she has a good prognosis now, she's not out of the woods yet. She'll remain on medications for the next five years, during which time she'll be closely watched and scanned frequently. In addition, she's dealing with the side effects of going through that trauma, she said.

"People think you're done with everything because you're done with chemotherapy . . . It's still a long road. It will be a long time before I get back to the normalcy of how I felt before," she said.

In the meantime, her kids continue to go to The Gathering Place as the family adjusts to what Geiger called a "new normal."

"I think it's a good thing for them to talk about it and keep it in the forefront so they don't have issues down the road," she said. "I'm thankful for the resources that The Gathering Place has provided."

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