

# FEATURES

Adam Turner, Editor

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## Celebrating Our Survivors

By **SAMANTHA TOY**  
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A breast cancer diagnoses can stop a woman in her tracks. The busy world stops while she takes a breath and pauses for a moment to carefully consider her options. When she comes up for air, she must go back to business as usual. For Shelley Park, she did just that.

"I continued to work," said Park, 52, director of student financial assistance. "My staff stepped in when I couldn't do things. I have a tremendous staff that was right there to pick up the slack."

Her diagnosis came in January 2006, just two months after her father died of cancer. She stepped out of the caregiver role and into the unfamiliar territory of breast cancer.

"It had just come through a mammogram," Park said. "I didn't feel any lumps or anything. Luckily mine was in Stage II when it was found."

Stage II breast cancer is an early stage and can be pres-

ent with a tumor or just cancer cells that have begun to grow and spread. It is typically contained to the breast and has not spread elsewhere.

"I was really worried about the treatment," Park said. "You always hear about chemo and what it does to you. Would it affect my ability to work, function? Would I feel bad for a number of months? It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I did lose my hair though."

Though losing her hair was a tough challenge, her short-term memory was just that: short.

"Mona [Isaacs] and I had talked about 'chemo brain,'"

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**Shelley Park**

By **WESLEY ROBINSON**  
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Fat Tuesday 2005 was a fateful day for Mona Isaacs, but she didn't let the bad news beat her – instead she took a trip down irony lane to Hooters after receiving her breast cancer diagnosis.

"In the back of my mind I knew I was going to get cancer," Isaacs said.

Her mother died of pancreatic cancer when she was 27 and she said several of her uncles died from various types of cancer.

Isaacs said she has always been a resilient person and the diagnosis didn't get her down for very long. It was at Hooters over drinks and wings that Isaacs and her sister-in-law saw Mardi Gras celebrations on TV. The two decided they would go to New Orleans the next year to celebrate her recovery.

Despite the bad diagnosis, Isaacs said she felt relieved that it was breast cancer and not another form of cancer.

"It changed for me when I could identify breast cancer," Isaacs said. "Yeah, I was right I was going to get cancer, but this was not the kind that was going to kill me. It became something that was not a death sentence. It was a challenge and I was going to get through it."

After her diagnosis in February 2005, she had modified radical mastectomy to remove the cancer in March, started chemotherapy in April and finally underwent radiation in August 2005.

Isaacs said she proudly sported nice earrings to go with her bald head because she didn't like to wear wigs and joked that it was easy to main-

➤ SEE **ISAACS**, PAGE B3



**Mona Isaacs**

By **TAYLOR PETTIT**  
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When Retha Sandlin found out she had cancer, she had one thought: "This won't bring me down."

"I just knew it wasn't going to be the end of me," said Sandlin, 46, Veteran Affairs certification official for Eastern student-veterans. "I had two young kids, and they needed me."

In August 2008, Sandlin found a lump in her breast.

Within days, Sandlin was undergoing surgery and preparing for chemotherapy.

"I was going through a divorce at the same time, so I used to rely on his family," she said. "I didn't have that anymore."

But she found strength from her co-workers, who also wore the survivor badge.

Shelley Park and other employees in the financial office took shifts during her chemotherapy. They made sure she laid down and was comfortable when dealing with the nausea that accompanies the medication.

"They were with me through it all," Sandlin said.

Sandlin's stage-three cancer was a shock but not a surprise.

Her mother had battled cancer, along with all 10 of her mother's siblings. After assessing her own genetics, Sandlin made sure she wasn't a carrier for her daughter.

Sandlin underwent six treatments from October through March.

She also made the decision to undergo a mastectomy.

"When you have no more breasts, the risk of it coming back is gone," she said. "It's the fear of never getting it again."

➤ SEE **SANDLIN**, PAGE B3



**Retha Sandlin**

By **STEPHANIE COLLINS**  
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Breast cancer: two words capable of producing numerous thoughts and images in people's minds. For one person, it might be the image of a pink ribbon. For another, it's the memory of a beloved lost aunt.

For Jill Price, breast cancer is a word as familiar as family.

Price's grandmother battled breast cancer nearly three decades ago. In 2002, her sister was diagnosed, and three years later, she passed away. She was Price's only sibling.

Then in the spring of 2009, 42-year-old Price went for her yearly mammogram.

"In the initial signs, they found a spot, but the radiologist at the time didn't really feel like it was anything to be concerned about," Price said. "It was very small, and he had a hard time seeing it."

A week or so later, Price said her doctor requested her an ultrasound and breast MRI. The same day she received the diagnosis.

She had breast cancer, but it was in the early stages.

"It's really hard to explain the feeling, just numbness I guess," Price said. "I mean it was just complete numbness."

Price's husband was in the waiting room, and she asked for him to come back but was told he couldn't come back until the ultrasound was finished.

At that moment she remembers a nurse walking over to squeeze her shaking hands. The nurse stood with her until her husband could come back.


"Probably the first thing that went through my mind were my kids, who would have been 16 and 12 at the time," she said.

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**Jill Price**





- About 1 in 8 U.S. women (just under 12 percent) will develop invasive breast cancer over the course of her lifetime.
- In 2011, an estimated 230,480 new cases of invasive breast cancer were expected to be diagnosed in women in the U.S., along with 57,650 new cases of non-invasive (in situ) breast cancer.
- About 2,140 new cases of invasive breast cancer were expected to be diagnosed in men in 2011. A man's lifetime risk of breast cancer is about 1 in 1,000.
- For women in the U.S., breast cancer death rates are higher than those for any other cancer, besides lung cancer.
- Besides skin cancer, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among

## Breast Cancer Statistics

- American women. Just under 30 percent of cancers in women are breast cancers.
- Caucasian women are slightly more likely to develop breast cancer than African-American women. However, in women under 45, breast cancer is more common in African-American women than white women. Overall, African-American women are more likely to die of breast cancer. Asian, Hispanic, and Native-American women have a lower risk of developing and dying from breast cancer.
  - In 2011, there were more than 2.6 million breast cancer survivors in the US.
  - About 5-10 percent of breast cancers can be linked to gene mutations (abnormal changes) inherited from one's mother or father. Mutations of the BRCA1

- and BRCA2 genes are the most common. Women with these mutations have up to an 80 percent risk of developing breast cancer during their lifetime, and they are more likely to be diagnosed at a younger age (before menopause). An increased ovarian cancer risk is also associated with these genetic mutations.
- About 85 percent of breast cancers occur in women who have no family history of breast cancer. These occur due to genetic mutations that happen as a result of the aging process and life in general, rather than inherited mutations.
  - The most significant risk factors for breast cancer are gender (being a woman) and age (growing older).
- STATISTICS COURTESY OF BREASTCANCER.ORG

## PARK

CONTINUED FROM B1

Park said. "You can't remember anything. Someone would say, 'don't tell anyone I told you that.' I would say 'don't worry. I won't remember it by the time I leave here today.'"

Luckily she had a great support system that had been in her shoes.

"I was not the first of my friends to be diagnosed with breast cancer," Park said. "When I was diagnosed, Mona had been diagnosed before I had. I was so fortunate because I had someone that I could talk to and depend on."

In fact other survivors became a great asset during this time as well.

"I hadn't had a family history of breast cancer," Park said, "so when you don't have an aunt or grandmother or even a mother that's had that, then you kind of have to reach out to other survivors for support."

After her diagnosis and eight months of chemotherapy and radiation treatments, she saw things a little differently.

"It's made me live differently," Park said. "I still work the same number of hours but I don't take things quite as seriously and I don't take myself as seriously. There is only so much I can do in a day and I know I need to go home and spend time with my husband and friends and family. It makes you rethink your perspectives on life."

Park also has a little advice for those who have been freshly diagnosed: try not to listen to other people's horror stories because what you experience in treatment is not what others experience.

"And rely on what your doctors are telling you. Listen to your doctors," Park said. "You are not their first patient. People just can't let cancer break their spirit."

Now that she has beat the disease, Park is focused on living life to the fullest.

"I had cancer. I don't have it now," Park said. "Do I ever worry that it will come back? Sure. I think everybody does but I don't let that dictate my life."

## ISAACS

CONTINUED FROM B1

tain.

"I hope people saw somebody doing what they had to do to get through [breast cancer] with some guts and grace," Isaacs said. Isaacs never made it to Mardi Gras, but it was because Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and not because of cancer.

"I'm still here," she said. "I still have birthdays."

While she would have preferred not to have cancer, Isaacs said her days are a little bit sweeter after making it though the illness and she doesn't know if life would mean as much without the experience.

"Even though one in eight women will get breast cancer, the good news is they will survive," she said. "If you use it as an opportunity, you live much better than you lived before."

Although she has been connected to Eastern for 35 years in one way or another, Isaacs said it wasn't until she had cancer that she saw began to see Eastern for what it was.

"I never fully understood what a university community was until I had cancer," she said. Isaacs said she let her guard down when she had cancer, which was something new for her.

People brought her food, offered to do her laundry and just spent time talking to her, among many things Isaacs said were helpful. She was the interim chief information officer at Eastern while she battled cancer and the former provost held the search to find a permanent person until she had completed her treatments.

"I trusted people to have my back and they did," Isaacs said. "I'll never be able to pay them back, other than having their back."

Supporting others has become something Isaacs is known for in the seven years since the diagnosis. She has paid forward the kindness that was shown to her by other breast cancer survivors on campus and said in general breast cancer survivors have formed a support group and celebrate overcoming cancer, as well as helping out others who deal with the illness.

"People have a bad mammogram and they walk through my door," she said. "To me that says a lot that people will seek you out to talk to you. I think we owe that to each other."

She said it wasn't bravery but self-preservation that got her through cancer, but she did what she had to do to keep living.

"The things that bring you joy and happiness, you've got to stop and enjoy them," Isaacs said. "There will be a day when you can't."

## SANDLIN

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Sandlin proceeded with implants and said the decision to get them was to maintain her self-confidence.

"Self-confidence is in your chest," Sandlin said. "It's all about feeling good about yourself."

Knowing the chemo would take away her shoulder-length blonde hair, she got to it first.

"I cut it all off myself," she said. "Sometimes I wore a wig, other times a do-rag."

Then she realized the chemo had taken her eyelashes.

"I went to a Mary Kay party and realized I had three eyelashes," Sandlin said. "I started wearing false eyelashes after that."

This year is different, though. Her hair is natural along with her eyelashes, and chemo is a distant memory. She is only required to visit the doctor once a year now.

"It's just a good feeling," she said.

Most people in her life know she is a survivor including her student workers, like Joshua Burch, 24, sports management major from Hamilton, Ohio.

"I like to support her and encourage her," Burch said. "I just love her as a person. When I come in and I'm angry or depressed, she brings me up. She's just a happy person."

Sandlin's office is decorated with little ribbon mementoes, from her mouse pad to magnets, which are all gifts from Burch.

A new pink ribbon décor will soon adorn her walls.

"She told me she wanted a mural painted on the wall that said 'Survivor,'" said Burch. "I told her my girlfriend painted, so we're going to put that up there for her."

## PRICE

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The doctor's recommended Price have a lumpectomy, which would only remove the lump and not the entire breast. Since they caught the cancer early, she wouldn't have to undergo any chemotherapy or radiation.

However, given the history of breast cancer in her family, she decided to have a bilateral mastectomy: The surgical removal of both breasts.

"My doctor said it was overkill, but it's three and half years later, and I haven't regretted it at all," Price said.

Not only was Price preparing herself for surgery at this point, but also she and her family had also just endured disastrous weather experience. Price's surgery was scheduled for May 15, 2009. Exactly one week before that, her family's house was taken by the tornadoes that hit Madison County.

"It just kind of exaggerated everything," she said. "It was

just the timing."

But Price had a huge support group for both her cancer and the loss of her home. She said her family, friends and church pulled together to offer support, but prayer was the most helpful thing for her and her family's struggle to get through.

Looking back, Price said she sees how often good things come out of unfortunate situations. She said her children were able to experience a lot through prayer and faith they otherwise wouldn't have.

One of the memories she recollects the most is the moment she was wheeled back for surgery and taken away from her family. During that short period of time leading up to her surgery, she was laying on the bed with no one around her that she knew.

"It's a pretty lonely kind of feeling for a minute," Price said. "I can just remember praying as I was laying there."

Right then she said an anesthesiologist walked up whom was not her doctor and began telling her about his mother's experience with breast cancer.

"He was just holding my hand, and it was almost like he knew," Price said. "I wasn't crying and hadn't said anything to anybody. And I just remember him saying, 'I've looked at your charts, and you're going to be just fine.'"

Price said she was ready to get the surgery over with but was fearful to wake up and hear what the surgeon had to say.

The surgery felt like a "blink," and the first words she heard waking up were "your lymph nodes are clear," Price said.

Her experience has taught her to look at bad situations and see how we can become better people because of them.

She encourages others to remain faithful in getting routine mammograms. Also, Price said to remember one in eight women will be diagnosed, but the cancer can strike men, as well.

Although breast cancer runs in Price's family, she said somebody with no family history of breast cancer could still get it.

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