

CHOOSING LOCAL CARE: A BREAST PATIENT'S JOURNEY

Before Virginia Howard could begin to fight breast cancer, she needed to make a critical decision. Should she receive treatment from Saint Mary's Center for Cancer in Reno? Or, would a cancer center in a larger city provide better care?

"I grew up in the Bay Area, so when I got diagnosed my parents wanted me to go there for my treatment," Howard said. "But, my first inclination was to stay here with my family and what I know."

Reno was, and is, home. Howard met her husband while living in San Francisco and the couple relocated to the Biggest Little City after they got married. Before moving, Howard was a pharmaceutical sales representative. Now, she's a kindergarten teacher at Jessie Beck Elementary School. At the time of her diagnosis, Howard's daughter was in middle school grade, and her son was in elementary.

"I wanted to drive my kids to school still," Howard, 51, said. "My girl takes dance, and I drive her to dance. I wanted to lead as normal of a lifestyle as I could."

So, she researched her options and reached out to a Reno oncologist who treated a family friend who survived breast cancer.

Being treated at Saint Mary's Center for Cancer and staying in Reno was the right decision, Howard said. Her doctors included Dr. Michelle Chu, Dr. Kathleen Legarza, Dr. Sowjanya Reganti, and Dr. Timothy Janiga.

"They were so kind and listened, and I never felt rushed," Howard said.

To treat the invasive ductal carcinoma in Howard's left breast, doctors performed a partial mastectomy and recommended four rounds of chemotherapy.

Throughout her treatment, Howard relied on her nurse navigator Amy Thompson, RN.

"She was like this ray of sunshine," Howard said. "In the face of all the ugly and all the hurt and the pain, I knew I could call Amy anytime, and she'd be up and happy and provide me with the information I needed."

For Thompson, Howard embodies the survivor spirit needed to beat breast cancer.

"She was constantly upbeat and positive," Thompson said of Howard. "She recognized when she was having bad days, obviously, but she always knew she would get through it."

The Saint Mary's Center for Cancer team treated Howard with such care and compassion that Howard said it was almost hard to accept she'd see them less after her final chemotherapy treatment.

"It was like a family," Howard said. "It was almost hard to leave."

Three months after her final treatment in July 2016, Howard's hair is starting to grow back. She runs. She teaches three days a week at Jessie Beck. And, she drives both her children to school.

"It's about knowing that life is short," Howard said. "It's about really appreciating what I do have and thanking God that I'm coming out the other end and feeling stronger."

