

MIND & BODY

Beating cancer

Survivors: 'You learn who you are'

By ELLEN CAMPBELL
Daily Pilot Correspondent

Beyond the spotless windows, sailboats glide through Newport Harbor. Sightseers stroll along the water, craning their necks to peer inside the house, hoping for an intimate glimpse of the coveted bayside lifestyle. Sandy Sewell sits on a sofa in her showcase living room with Daisy, a silky black spaniel, at her side.

She has everything. Ten years ago, she also had cancer.

"My whole life changed. The doctor told me I might only have another five to 10 years," Sewell said.

Sewell and her husband, Richard, a Newport Beach home builder, donated \$500,000 to the new Hoag Cancer Center, which breaks ground next month. But Sewell did not stop there. She established Circle 1000, a group of women donors who support the new center.

Prager serves on Circle 1000's steering committee. But even before she got involved with Sewell's group, she at Hoag Hospital every week, talking with cancer patients, sharing their fears and reassuring them about the future.

Sewell's cancer was not entirely unexpected. Her mother had died of cancer at age 43, so her doctor was always alert for any symptoms of the disease.

One day he found a lump that had grown larger. He immediately gave

'It doesn't matter who you are or who your husband is. Health is more important than anything.'

"After the surgery I remember lying there thinking, 'If I only have a certain amount of time left, there are a lot of things I want to do.' I had to decide what meant the most to me in life. That was my family."

A lot of other things have changed in the 10 years since Sewell's surgery. "Back then, cancer wasn't publicized like it is now. People were afraid to talk about it," Sewell recalls.

"Cancer isn't a four-letter word anymore," agrees Barbara Prager, a well-known Orange County restaurant consultant whose cancer is now in remission. "People are getting involved; they want to help."

Between them, Sewell and Prager exemplify an emerging attitude toward the disease. Once a topic mentioned in hushed tones, cancer today is an emotional ordeal that compels women like them to speak out about their experiences. And take action.

Both women say they emerged with a newfound purpose in life: to help other cancer sufferers.

Sewell a mammogram. That was on a Monday. On Tuesday she was admitted to the hospital. She had surgery on Wednesday and lost her breast.

Within those few days, Sewell's life changed forever.

"It alters your perspective of what is really important," she says. "It doesn't matter who you are or who your husband is. Health is more important than anything."

"I've always been an optimistic person," Sewell claims, "but I've changed. A lot. I used to be more easygoing, carefree. Now I would say I'm less easygoing, more...no, not serious..." She can't come up with the word that describes her new attitude. But it's obvious she feels the change is for the better.

Prager feels she too has changed for the better. "Cancer is a learning experience," she says. "I've gotten a lot out of it. You learn who you are. How you handle the stress, the weight loss, the loss of self-esteem. You find



Daily Pilot photo by Mike Schwartz

Sandy Sewell, founder of Circle 1000, and Barbara Prager are both cancer survivors.

out what kind of person you are."

Prager, originally from Newport Beach, was living in Northern California when she learned of her cancer more than a year ago. She received most of her treatment at Stanford, returning to her family and friends in Southern California after she was over the worst.

"Cancer is such a private illness," she says. "Patients don't like to dwell on it. They are afraid of other people's reactions, of making them uncomfortable. That's why it's good to have someone to talk to who has shared a similar experience."

It's also why Prager regularly visits with patients on Hoag's eighth-floor cancer ward.

"Sometimes the doctors are busy or in a hurry. They just don't have the time to sit down and reassure and talk to patients. It helps having family and friends around, but some people here don't have anyone. These people need the most support."

Sewell founded Circle 1000 in August. Already more than 200

women have indicated they want to help. The "1000" in the name indicates how many supporters she eventually hopes to have in the group. Women will contribute from \$150 to \$1,000 annually to the functioning of the center.

"The original idea was to have a large patroness group, since cancer is a bigger threat to women. In Orange County the numbers are even higher than the national average. I have so many friends that have had cancer or know someone who has cancer," she said.

Today, Sewell and Prager will attend Circle 1000's inaugural celebration, a brunch at the Four Seasons Hotel. The featured speaker is actress Jill Ireland, wife of Charles Bronson and National Crusade Chairwoman for the American Cancer Society. She also authored "Life Wish," a book that describes her bout with breast cancer.

Sometimes it's easier to talk about cancer to strangers than to those close to you, Sewell says.