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MOVING FORWARD AFTER CANCER

A key part of **St. Mary Medical Center's** comprehensive team treating patients with breast cancer, plastic surgeon **Nathaniel Holzman, M.D.**, aims to restore women's confidence and self-image.

by **MATT COSENTINO** photo by **ALISON DUNLAP**

"Why me?" is a perfectly understandable reaction to a cancer diagnosis. Yet the thought never occurred to Leslie Cervenka when received that dreaded phone call just a few days before Thanksgiving in 2020. She was too busy trying to figure out how to move forward with her life.

Thanks to her own will to fight and the expertise of the dedicated medical staff at St. Mary Medical Center, that's exactly what she did.

"I can't say enough amazing things about my team at St. Mary," she beams, cancer-free almost four years after her medical issues first arose at the age of 33.

Cervenka, a Newtown resident, was visiting her gynecologist when a suspicious lump was first discovered in her right breast. She was sent for a mammogram and a biopsy was taken, and Russell Reisner, M.D., a breast surgical oncologist at St. Mary Medical Center, confirmed a suspicion: invasive ductal carcinoma. An entire team then sprang into action, with the primary goal of treating Cervenka's cancer but also to preserve the young mother's quality of life.

Dr. Reisner presented her with several options; she decided to have a double mastectomy, which he performed about a month later. Fortunately, her cancer had not spread, and no chemotherapy or radiation was necessary. In the meantime, Cervenka met with St. Mary Chief of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Nathaniel Holzman, M.D., about the reconstruction possibilities.

"We always want to do the best for any of our patients, whether they're 25 or 85," Dr. Holzman says. "Obviously, when these women are diagnosed with cancer at such a young age, they're just starting certain aspects of their lives, whether it's parenthood or a new career, and it hits home a little more."

Dr. Holzman offered two options to Cervenka. She could choose no reconstruction and have an aesthetic flat closure following the mastectomy, or she could opt for either an implant-based reconstruction or an autologous reconstruction, in

which the patient's own tissue from another part of the body is transplanted to the chest to reconstruct the breast.

"Honestly, breasts have never been something that defined me," she says. "At the same time, I wanted to be comfortable in a bathing suit, and I wasn't super comfortable with being completely flat chested. I asked Dr. Holzman what he would recommend to his wife or his daughter. He was very helpful in walking me through all of the options so that I could make an informed decision."

She selected an implant-based reconstruction. The procedure can be performed along with the mastectomy, or delayed. Either way, Dr. Holzman says it can be an important part of the healing process.

"The goal is to help someone return to their whole self," he adds. "Patients don't choose cancer, but at least we can help them try to maintain their self-identity, their body image, and their confidence. Obviously, when it comes to breast cancer, the main treatment is to make sure they're cancer free. But when they are cancer free, we want to make sure they have the confidence to move forward, to live their life, and to feel like they're a survivor."

Describing herself as a "solutions-driven person," Cervenka selected an immediate reconstruction. In no time, she was back to her job at a catering company, exercising, and being active with her family.

"She wanted to get it done quickly so she could move forward with her life," Dr. Holzman says. "She was always a glass-half-full kind of person, and she still is. She never questioned, 'Why is this happening to me?' She was always optimistic and willing to fight, and she won."

"Dr. Holzman was always so positive about my attitude," she adds. "Having that kind of positive affirmation from my doctors was extremely helpful during my path to recovery."

Breast reconstruction has come a long way with technological advancements, and the safety of the procedures continues to rise. Dr. Holzman is excited to see what comes next with stem cell therapy and tissue growth. He is proud to work for a hospital where innovation is embraced, and where world-class care can be provided to people in the community they call home.

"Being a premier institution in the community was the goal of the hospital when I came on board 12 years ago, and I think it's still the goal today," he says. "I live in the community, and it's nice to be available to patients in our community and to offer the latest advancements in medicine so close to home." ■



St. Mary Medical Center

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