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## Faces of Hope | Felicia Thomas-Lynn

### Cancer survivors share stories



**Ernie Mastroianni**

**Sorting hand-knitted booties that are given to ovarian cancer patients are (from left) Sandi Wagner,**

**Gail Foreman, Katie Fetzer, Kelli Zembruski and Karen Fetzer.**

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A microscopic sea creature - that's what Gail Foreman was told she may have swallowed while competing in the open swim portion of a triathlon - and that the parasite was making her very ill.

"They treated me for that, but I became even sicker," said Foreman, who tried to continue training for her next big race and attributed various symptoms to a heavy athletic schedule.

"I thought my weight loss was through training, and I thought the backache was from riding my bike."

But nothing could be further from the truth. Three weeks after logging her best time ever as a triathlete, Foreman was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

"I had one foot in the grave," said Foreman, recalling the awful day she learned she had an advanced form of the disease that had already spread to her abdomen and pelvis.

Now in remission after a successful surgery and chemotherapy, Foreman and other ovarian cancer survivors tell their story as part of the Survivors Teaching Students: Saving Women's Lives program through the Wisconsin Ovarian Cancer Alliance.

The alliance, which turns 10 years old in May, was founded by two sisters, Sandi Wagner and Kelli Zembruski, who knew very little about the disease but were quickly brought up to speed when their younger sister, Joan Sagan, was diagnosed with it.

"The majority of those diagnosed are already in Stage 3, which means the disease has spread to other parts of their body," said Wagner, whose organization aims to raise awareness of the early warning signs and educate those in the community, including medical professionals, about the subtle symptoms of the disease in hopes of increasing early detection.

In the state, she said, 400 ovarian cancer cases are diagnosed each year, and at least 300 women die of the disease. Her sister was one of them.

"Unfortunately, this disease, many times, is misdiagnosed," said Foreman, whose symptoms persisted for six months before she was properly diagnosed. "Up until 2007, ovarian cancer was referred to as the silent killer, but we now know that there are some symptoms."

Those include: pelvic, abdominal or back pain, difficulty eating or feeling full quickly, and urinary - urgency or frequency - symptoms. Women who have these symptoms almost daily for more than a few weeks should see their doctor.

Through the Survivors Teaching Students program, ovarian cancer survivors meet with students in health care fields, including physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses and physician assistants, to increase the students' understanding of symptoms and risk factors that can lead to diagnosis when the disease is in an early, treatable stage.

During the one-hour presentation, survivors tell their stories to illustrate the difficulty of early diagnosis, as well as

dispel some of the myths surrounding the disease.

Katie Fetzer, for example, was 22 when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

"There is a common misconception out there that it affects only older women," said Fetzer, who is part of the team that speaks to medical students. "Many of the students are my age. I could be their sister, their wife or their girlfriend."

The sessions put a face on the disease, said Peter Johnson, a clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology and the medical director of gynecologic oncology at Aurora Health Care.

"Many of the students say it's the most valuable hour they spend in their clinical studies," said Johnson. "It brings a humanizing side to medicine."

Johnson will be among a panel of doctors to answer questions regarding ovarian cancer during the alliance's fourth annual Survivors and Guest Brunch, which will take place at 11 a.m. May 2 at the Westmoor Country Club in Brookfield.

"We want survivors to have a day of relaxation. They get to meet women who have been on the same journey," Zembruski said.

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## Wisconsin Ovarian Cancer Alliance

**Mission:** Dedicated to overcoming ovarian cancer

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**Web site:** [www.wisconsinovariancancer.com](http://www.wisconsinovariancancer.com)

*Faces of Hope focuses on Milwaukee-area people who need a hand and the organizations that are helping them. If you have story ideas, e-mail Felicia Thomas-Lynn at [fthomas-lynn@journalsentinel.com](mailto:fthomas-lynn@journalsentinel.com) or call (414) 224-2073.*

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