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October 24, 2012

The “Pink Nurse” Uses Her Pink Car to Encourage Annual Mammograms

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. — The term “true colors” is used to describe one’s authentic self; a person’s real character. Career nurse Dolly Wilson bleeds one color: pink. Known as the “Pink Nurse,” this Gardner-Webb University alum is making a difference for women diagnosed with breast cancer. Armed with knowledge, her pink scrubs, and now, even a pink car, Wilson helps Blue Ridge HealthCare patients navigate the frightening valley of breast cancer, from diagnosis to treatment and beyond.

“I had been a nurse for 28 years, but had not focused on breast cancer,” Wilson shared. “I was given an opportunity five years ago to launch a new program in which I would serve as a patient navigator for breast cancer. Four days later, my sister Molly was diagnosed with breast cancer. That was confirmation that I had stepped into the right position at exactly the right time.”

Wilson spent the next several months learning everything she could about the disease and walked with her own sister each step of the way. “There are many kinds of breast cancer, and each type, size, and rate of proliferation is different,” she said. “I am there to help educate them along the way so they will know what to expect and be able to deal with this confusing diagnosis by being informed.”

In August, Wilson earned her Master of Science in Nursing from Gardner-Webb University. A few days after graduation, she went to the body shop to pick up her car, which she’d had painted pink. Her goal was simple: the more attention she could draw to the importance of mammogram screenings, the more lives that could be saved.

“This disease can be beat, but early detection is the key,” Wilson shared. “I tell my patients that ‘knowledge is armor.’ A mammogram is the best way to identify cancer in its earliest stages, and when women ask me about my car, I ask them if they’ve had their mammogram.” So far, she’s encouraged more than 40 women to get a mammogram. She takes down their information including their name and date of birth in order to help them find resources to reduce out-of-pocket costs.

The present-day patient navigator program was developed in response to the American Cancer Society’s national hearings on cancer and the poor, which cited gaps in service that led to fragmentation of care; delayed and/or missed appointments; substantial barriers to care, including lack of knowledge of available financial (or insurance) assistance; and lack of

social support. The Cancer Center at Blue Ridge HealthCare in Valdese, N.C. established the program in 2007 and Wilson has worked with more than 100 women each year, offering information, support, and financial resources.

“No matter how many patients I see, no matter how many people I’ve helped, the overwhelming common emotion is fear,” she reflected. “These patients wonder ‘am I going to die?’ The most encouraging information is that there is a 97 percent survival rate with early detection.”

For many patients, the logistics of treatment would be impossible without an advocate like Dolly. In addition to helping clients understand their diagnosis and getting them lined up for treatment, Wilson also assists with practical issues that may arise. “We help them with transportation. We help them with medications,” she said. “In extreme situations, I have even babysit their children. One lady had a number of children, and every time she would have a treatment, I would watch her two smallest ones. We got really attached. Believe me, the rewards I get from that are indescribable.”

Ultimately, her pink scrubs and pink car are external manifestations of her internal desire to offer a lifeline of support to women facing their biggest fear turned reality. “I try to help her accept—not yield to—the illness that has become a part of her life,” Wilson shared. “We are not here to promote our way, but to help her find *her* way.”