

DELIGHTFUL DAY



JUDY BARNETT LEE/THE BEE

Barbara and Val Johnson sign in for Sunday's cancer survivors luncheon, Daffodil Delight, at Modesto's Memorial Regional Cancer Center.

Celebrating victory over cancer

■ Survivor credits her very own 'Chicken Soup': A passionate will to live

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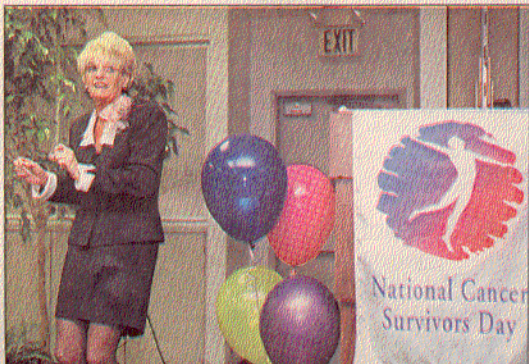
Thirteen years ago, doctors removed a tumor the size of a baseball from Mary Lynn Miller's bladder and told her she didn't have long to live.

The Manhattan Beach career counselor, who spoke Sunday afternoon to about 100 cancer survivors and their families at Modesto's Memorial Regional Cancer Center, took the grim news with a grain of salt.

Instead of giving up, Miller went on a path of self discovery and vowed to make each day count. She attributes her recovery, at least in part, to the fact that she put the passion back in her life.

"If you can make yourself sick with worry and stress, could you make yourself well with happiness and joy?" she said.

No matter how bad things seemed, she kept a positive attitude.



Mary Lynn Miller says happiness and joy, not worry and stress, helped her survive cancer.

Instead of viewing her doctor's orders as a hassle, for example, she convinced herself that her medications and radiation treatments were just a step on the path to health. Cancerous cells could have spread through her body after doctors removed the tumor, but they never did.

Miller said she thinks her passionate will to live did the trick.

"None of us really know where the healing comes from," she said. "But once I began to make passion a priority in my life, the quality of my life increased dramatically."

It was a message that went over well with many in the audience, including Joe Velasquez of Modesto, a colon-cancer survivor who brought his wife, children and grandchildren to Sunday's luncheon.

He needed three surgeries and was out of work for a year, and has been cancer-free for more than four years.

"Attitude, family and a lot of prayer is the thing that pulls you through," Velasquez said.

The hospital sponsors a luncheon for cancer survivors each June, in honor of National Cancer Survivors Day and the nearly 8.4 million Americans who have beaten the disease.

Miller was asked to speak because her story is told in "Chicken Soup for the Surviving Soul: 101 Stories of Cancer Survivors," a self-help book that has been on The New York Times best-seller list.

"We really try to stay away from the scientific 'this is your cancer' talk," said Sandy Proctor, vice president of nursing at Memorial Medical Center.

Modesto's Ruth Young, whose husband was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1984 and is alive and well today, said such talks help patients cope with a disease that once drew only whispers and pity.

"People see that they're not alone," she said. "Now it's talked about, and there's so much more hope."

What to watch for

Nearly half of all cancer patients are cured but the disease is still the second-leading cause of death in the United States. About 552,000 Americans are expected to die from the disease this year, according to the American Cancer Society.

Warning signs include lumps, sores that don't heal, unusual bleeding, change in bowel or bladder habits, nagging hoarseness or cough, and indigestion.

Early detection is the key to beating the disease. Women should perform breast self-exams monthly, and see medical providers for routine mammograms, Pap tests and digital rectal exams.

Men should perform testicular self-exams monthly, and see medical provider for blood tests to check for prostate-specific antigen, and digital rectal exams.

Eating a balanced diet and not smoking are the best ways to prevent the disease.

For more information, call the American Cancer Society at 524-7242.