

Group Health saved my life

SPOKANE VALLEY RESIDENT Anne Whigham's real birth date is Jan. 28. But her new birthday, she says, is May 28—the date of her breast cancer surgery back in 2003. “That surgery set in motion the process that saved my life,” she says.

Whigham's story begins in 1992, when her sister was diagnosed with breast cancer. Whigham didn't have any signs of the disease herself. However, since breast cancer can run in families, her personal physician became increasingly diligent about making sure Whigham got her routine breast screening exams on schedule.

In 2003, that diligence paid off. A routine mammogram revealed something suspicious, and a follow-up mammogram confirmed a breast cancer diagnosis. Whigham needed a mastectomy and reconstructive surgery. “I was referred right away to a surgeon outside of Group Health who is one of the best breast cancer and reconstruction surgeons around,” says Whigham.

The surgery went well. So well that she was able to start follow-up chemotherapy at Group Health within a few weeks, and go back to work about a week after that. But her job complicated the treatment.

Whigham, a program manager for the Department of Health, lived in Spokane but worked in Olympia Monday through Thursday. The only weekday she was at home for treatment was Friday.

The other complication was that she didn't respond well to chemo. She was so sick after each session that she often had to go back to the infusion center at Riverfront Medical Center for additional care and fluids. Plus her white blood count wasn't responding as well as it should after treatments. So Group Health ratcheted up her care a notch—giving her access to services in both Olympia and Spokane.

On a week when she was scheduled for chemo, Whigham would go to Olympia Medical Center on Tuesday or Wednesday for a blood draw, to see if she



Anne Whigham (left) with her Group Health oncologist Janet Chestnut, MD.

was in good enough shape to handle chemo that week. If she was doing OK, the chemo appointment would be scheduled for Friday in Spokane.

“I had a Group Health physician in Spokane, and one in Olympia,” says Whigham. “Teams at each medical center followed my progress closely and made all the arrangements for my care. All I had to do was show up when they told me to. And if I was having any problems, I got in right away for an appointment. If I wasn't a Group Health patient, I never would have had this amazing trans-state care.”

One time when she dissolved in tears during an office visit, her oncologist, Janet Chestnut, MD, set her up with a therapist right away. And then there was the time, right before her third chemo session, when she told her doctor that she didn't think she could go through any more treatments. They were just too hard.

Dr. Chestnut asked her if she thought she could do just one more session. “I thought a minute and then I said yes, I thought I could do that. I made it through the next treatment, and then she asked me if I thought I could do just one more. I said yes again. And that's how I finally made it all the way through chemo and radiation. I don't think I'd be here today if it wasn't for Group Health and their great staff.”

Whigham says her experience with cancer and the various treatments taught her that if you just keep putting one foot in front of the other, and don't focus on the big picture when it's too overwhelming, you can get yourself through just about anything. —Ginny Smith