

Katy community leader credits early cancer detection for saving her life

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Suburbs // Katy



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Kathy Alt is one of Katy’s most prominent figures in the charity realm. As director of The Ballard House, a Katy-based organization that houses individuals receiving treatment for life-threatening illnesses free of charge, Alt knew the value of early detection for saving lives.

Now, thanks to early detection, Alt is a breast cancer survivor.

While many women put off their routine mammograms due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Alt still went for her annual mammogram.

“There’s a history of breast cancer in my family,” Alt said. “I’ve been going to Houston Methodist West Hospital and getting 3D mammograms for several years. I always had in the back of my mind that cancer would be coming for me.”

Alt, 56, had never had a concerning mammogram. But in October of 2020, Alt got a call from the hospital with the results of her biopsy. She had breast cancer.

“My doctor told me that for the next year of my life, treating this cancer would be my new normal,” Alt recalled. In response, Alt replied, “I don’t have time for cancer.”



Kathy Alt, director of The Ballard House, credits early cancer screening for saving her life.
Courtesy of Kathy Alt

Alt was determined to beat the cancer. Her doctor put her in contact with Dr. Candy Arentz, a breast surgical oncologist at the Houston Methodist Cancer Center West Hospital.

Within hours of Alt's phone call, Alt was sitting with Arentz and crafting a treatment plan. "I liked that she spoke to me frankly, but with compassion," Alt recalled. "Dr. Arentz listened - really listened- and gave me her honest opinion. None of the other doctors did that."

It wasn't the first time Alt and Arentz had met. The two had connected at a Ballard House fundraiser prior to the pandemic.

"Many of our patients stay at The Ballard House and it's a tremendous resource," Arentz said. "So I understood that Kathy's main concern was getting her cancer under control as quickly as possible in order to continue her work. My job was to walk her through the available options and ensure we charted the best treatment for her goals and lifestyle."

Arentz joined forces with Dr. Warren Ellsworth, medical director of plastic and reconstructive surgery at Houston Methodist West to create a course of treatment that could allow Alt to continue her work at The Ballard House.

"Each patient's case is reviewed by the cancer team," Ellsworth noted. "In Kathy's case, she had some restrictions at work and personal obligations that were really important to her. Dr. Arentz and I were able to work together and time her scans and treatment around her personal obligations. This allowed her to continue to care for the guests at The Ballard House."

Because the cancer had been detected early, Alt didn't need chemotherapy. Instead, she opted for the swift action of a double mastectomy followed by reconstructive surgery.

"My mindset was to attack it," Alt said.

The surgery to remove the cancer went well, Arentz noted, but Alt's recovery was rife with struggles.

"Life happens along with cancer care," Arentz said.

In Alt's case, she not only had to contend with the changes and strain the pandemic had put on regular hospital procedures but also the risk to The Ballard House. The organization houses a medically vulnerable population and everyone there was particularly susceptible to contracting COVID-19, noted Sarah Lam, communications director for Houston Methodist.

In January, Alt faced what was possibly her biggest danger yet. COVID-19 swept through The Ballard House, exposing immunocompromised patients to the virus. Alt and several others contracted the virus.

The Ballard House closed while the workers quarantined. Alt's reconstructive surgery, too, was delayed. Her doctors were concerned that she wouldn't be healthy enough to be intubated for surgery. and it also delayed Alt's reconstruction surgery.

After reconstructive surgery, Alt was still recovering when the polar vortex Winter Storm Uri hit the Houston area in mid-February. The pipes at The Ballard House burst.

Alt got an infection during the crisis, and had to be admitted to the emergency room.

"I'll never forget walking into the emergency room and seeing Kathy after the winter storm," Ellsworth said. "Everything that could be thrown at this lady was thrown at her and she got through it. Cancer treatment comes with a lot of challenges for women, and we always acknowledge and discuss the possible bumps in the road. The takeaway message is that our team at Houston Methodist West is prepared for anything that comes our way."

Ellsworth was able to save the reconstruction work and Alt went on to recover, Lam said.

Alt credited her survival to her family and friends, God, her doctors at Houston Methodist West and the guests at The Ballard House. "The guests inspired me because of the grace they have. The people there are living and fighting every day," said Alt.

Alt hopes that her story will inspire more women to make cancer screenings a priority.

"It's sobering to think of the number of breast cancers that were missed over the last fifteen months," Arentz said. "When the pandemic hit, everyone was busy adapting to the new normal. Kids were home from school, parents were working from home and many people were scared to leave their homes. Cancer screenings were put off. Now it's time to reschedule those appointments."

Ellsworth added, "It's not too late. Having a mammogram can give you peace of mind and if there is a concern, we can do so much more when we find cancer early. The survivorship chances are so much greater, and the treatment process easier with early detection."

"Early detection saved my life," Alt said. "Now I hope that my story will help save others."

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