



Julie Schaffner

Wilmette

Age: 55

In February of 2009, Julie Schaffner suddenly began to feel so tired that she could barely drive herself home from work. A few months later, the mother of three was diagnosed with advanced, stage 3 ovarian cancer that was metastatic and in her lymph nodes. It's a form of cancer with a very bad prognosis.

Six days later, Schaffner went in for massive surgery—a radical hysterectomy and lymph node dissection. Because she lost a lot of blood and wound up in intensive care, she stayed in the hospital for eight days.

Yet, six weeks later, Schaffner returned to her job as chief nursing executive and chief operating officer of Advocate Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge—to her doctors' chagrin.

"I told them it would normalize my life," she says. "I love my job—it's a calling. I can impact people's lives in a positive way." She's been a hospital administrator for 21 years.

Her co-workers, who know and respect her deeply, are helping her cope; one of them made sure she didn't overwork herself the first week by escorting her out of the building at 1 p.m. each day.

Her work—along with her family and friends—gives her purpose and keeps her alive.

Before Schaffner started losing her hair, her two daughters, Lindsay, 21, and Kendall, 13, took her wig shopping, all of them trying on different looks and taking silly pictures. That could have been a very depressing day, Schaffner recalls, but it wasn't.

"You have to laugh. You would lose your mind if you felt sorry for yourself all day every day," she says. And, with a wig, she points out, "you never have a bad hair day."

For now, Schaffner feels and looks great; she drinks green tea and takes long walks. You'd never know what she's fighting. In addition to continuing to provide outstanding care for patients—the kind of care she herself needs—Schaffner would like to focus on creating lots of cancer support services, including possibly starting a chapter of Gilda's Club (named for comedian Gilda Radner, who died of ovarian cancer in 1989) to raise awareness.

"I love raising awareness, even just through telling my own story," she says.

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