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Feel Your Boobies, Save a Life

posted by Claudia Lamparter | October 27, 2014

October is breast cancer awareness month. You may be thinking I'm young, I'm not in danger of getting cancer; my mom/aunt/etc. knows how to take care of herself, why am I needed? Well, breast cancer can really strike anyone at any age. Leigh Hurst, the founder of Feel Your Boobies, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004 at the young age of 33. Before this, Leigh never thought about breast cancer at all. Even though she noticed a lump on her breast, she didn't think anything of it, and doctors never noticed it until she pointed it out during an annual exam. Two years later, she was sent to get a mammogram, followed by an ultrasound and biopsy, which revealed the lump to be Stage 1 breast cancer. Leigh beat the cancer, and also found her life's passion: making sure other women knew to perform self-exams and get any suspicious lumps checked out right away. And that's how Feel Your Boobies was born.

Question: How did Feel Your Boobies start?

Leigh Hurst: Feel Your Boobies started in 2004 after my own breast cancer diagnosis at the age of 33. I realized after my diagnosis that "feeling my boobies" was the only reason my lump was detected. The lump went unnoticed for a couple of years during my routine annual exams. I had to point the lump out to my doctors, and even then they felt it wasn't something to be concerned about. Had I not known how my own body felt, it could have gone on much longer until I found out I had breast cancer. I initially just made a "feel your boobies" t-shirt for fun, to remind my friends to do something that had saved my life. The t-shirt caught national attention very quickly and from that, the Feel Your Boobies Foundation was born.

Q: What is the mission and ultimate goal of Feel Your Boobies?

LH: The mission of the Feel Your Boobies Foundation is to use unconventional and unexpected methods to promote proactive breast [exams] among young women. Our goal is to engage young women who, like me, generally don't think they are at risk for breast cancer. We deliver our call-to-action using a more casual and playful approach vs. more traditional methods that feel geared to an older population.

Q: How can a self-exam raise a woman's survival rate? In other words, if she does a self-exam and catches cancer early, how are survival rates impacted?

LH: Early detection of breast cancer is key to increased survival rates. For women under 40, they are generally not being screened for breast cancer through annual mammograms (which start at age 40 for

most women). Therefore, knowing your own body is critical so that if a change occurs you can bring it to a doctor's attention immediately. Survival rates for early stage breast cancers can be close to 100%, so the key is to know how your breasts feel normally so that you can detect any changes that might occur over time.

Feel Your Boobies actually promotes "breast awareness," which means just taking the time to get to know the geography of your breasts. Self-Breast Exam, by definition, means that you follow a specific step-by-step method to examining your breasts. And while this is helpful to some women, many women worry they are not doing them correctly and therefore shy away from self-breast exams. It's important to note that up to 80% of women find their lump just through the course of their daily routine (not through self-breast exams), so Feel Your Boobies likes to remind young women that it's less about HOW you feel your breasts and more about getting to know what is normal for you.

Q: How does Feel Your Boobies spread the word about self-exams?

LH: Feel Your Boobies uses unconventional methods to promote our message since the more traditional methods didn't get through to me. I never picked up the brochures in the doctor's office and wasn't doing a self-breast exam when I found my lump. We have planned campaigns that make sharing our message fun. We like to call it a "friendly reminder." Social media campaigns like the Boobicon.Me campaign allowed our Facebook followers to create a customized "feel your boobies" icon that was sharable or could be used as your profile image. We have also done aerial banner campaigns on the Jersey Shore and pulled off a Feel Your Boobies Flash Mob in NYC in Union Square. Engaging people with our message and making it fun so they want to share it is how we approach all of our campaigns. You can read more about our campaigns by going to www.feelyourboobies.com/past-campaigns.

Q: Most of our readers are between the ages 13-25; how can they be proactive in the fight against breast cancer and/or how they can help women around them?

LH: As with most things in life, it pays to be proactive, and that's certainly true with your breast health. You know your body better than anyone, so getting to know your breasts is crucial to proactive breast health. You should also take time to get to know your family history. If your mother, aunt, or sister has been diagnosed you may be eligible for genetic testing to determine if you're at an increased risk yourself. It's important to note that 75% of breast cancer cases are in women who do NOT have a family history...so while family history can play a key role in being a risk factor, most women who are diagnosed have no history of the disease.

For those women who are attending college, they should look into our College Outreach Program, which is a program where we provide FREE Feel Your Boobies Reminder Kits to college health centers nationwide. The materials in our kits can be used to promote breast health on campus and bring our life-saving call-to-action to young women on campuses nationwide. You can read more about this program here: <http://www.feelyourboobies.com/college-outreach>.



Bottom line: even if you're young, you're not invincible, and it never hurts to be proactive. Also, reminding female family members to do self-exams and go in for mammograms may save their life. And make sure to alert your doctor if ANYTHING is off or wrong.

Love & Honor,
Claudia Lamparter

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