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Memorial for a cancer fighter: more survivors

by Laura Billings

One of the highlights of the annual meeting of the Minnesota Ovarian Cancer Alliance this evening was to be the introduction of the Raine Snyder Fund, named for the board member whose own battle against ovarian cancer has sparked what her husband calls a "fanatical desire" to make sure other women know the symptoms of this deadly disease as surely as they understand their need to schedule a mammogram or pap smear.

Though Snyder herself, a human resources dynamo from Eden Prairie, was looking forward to sharing news of the fund's inception with her friends tonight at the Southdale Library, she will not be in attendance.

Her memorial service was held Monday morning.

Snyder was insistent that her fund not be a "memorial," always referring to herself as a survivor of the disease, and never a victim. On Thursday, the cancer that wasn't properly diagnosed until five years after the first symptoms surfaced finally overwhelmed her.

Even in her last months, Snyder, who was 56, was still meeting with medical students to educate them about the early signs of ovarian cancer, posting updates of her battle on her Web page at www.caringbridge.org/mn/raine and scheduling interviews with reporters. Her plan was to use the time she had left to make sure other women had the time she never got to stop a disease that often isn't detected until the advanced stage, when chances of recovery are slim.

"Getting the word out about ovarian cancer became Raine's whole goal in life," said Dodie Thomas, a longtime friend who delivered one of the eulogies Monday. "The symptoms are so innocuous, so easily overlooked, that it can be easy for doctors to dismiss it. She never wanted it to happen to another woman again."

Snyder herself was not easy to dismiss, say friends who describe her as articulate and soulful, the winner of the Wise Woman Award from the National Association of Women Business Owners just prior to her cancer diagnosis in 2003. For five years, she had been seeing doctors for the same series of symptoms — abdominal pain, bloating around her belly, severe diarrhea and shortness of breath.

Though she told doctors she intuitively felt it was cancer, it was initially diagnosed as Crohn's disease. Not until after years of ineffective treatments did she finally receive a CA-125 blood test, a tumor marker for ovarian cancer. A normal reading is between 0 and 30. Snyder's reading was 443. A doctor told her he hoped she had no delusions that she would survive.

"So she went home, planned her own funeral and cleaned out her closets," said Thomas, and then she joined the board of MOCA, where she shared her story on the group's Web site and with almost everyone she encountered.

So insistent was she on spreading the word about early detection, says Thomas, that a refrigerator repairman once left a service job at her house vowing to get more tests for his girlfriend, who was suffering from the same set of abdominal complaints that Snyder had. A father whose 20-year-old daughter was about to undergo her first chemo sent a "thank you" e-mail to

MOCA after Snyder stopped by to offer her effusive support and advice. "Yesterday it Rained on my daughter" was the subject line.

As Snyder's recent obituary — most of which she composed herself — put it: "Sometimes, in illness, people turn inward, worlds become smaller and hopes shrink. Not so with Raine! That which ultimately took her body never took her LIFE or her SPIRIT!"

Lorraine "Raine" Snyder leaves behind a husband, Tripp; a son, Brody; a dog, Bailey; a potluck-lunch list of more than 80 women; and a sisterhood of ovarian cancer survivors, current and future, who may benefit from her efforts to make women as aware of ovarian cancer as we are now of breast cancer.

"It was really her dream," said Thomas.

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TO HELP

For more information about ovarian cancer, to attend the MOCA annual meeting or to contribute to the Raine Snyder Fund for MOCA, visit the Minnesota Ovarian Cancer Alliance at www.mnovarian.org.