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Breast cancer deals a blow to homeless woman

By [COURTNEY PERKES](#)

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Geraldine Watts used to perform her monthly breast self-exams in the shower or in front of her bedroom mirror while getting dressed in the morning.

But after becoming homeless last year, she sometimes resorted to bathing with soap and paper towels in a Del Taco bathroom. Her only mirror was on the sun visor of the car where she slept.

Still, one day in March, while sitting in the front seat of her boyfriend's beat-up Ford Taurus, Watts checked her breasts.

"It just stuck with me to do it," Watts said. "No matter where you are, you can do it."

She felt a lump, and two weeks later, the fear that comes with a diagnosis of breast cancer.

Watts was accustomed to fending for herself on the streets, but found she wasn't alone in fighting her disease, thanks in part to the thousands of Orange County residents who raise money for the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure.

The Sept. 26 race at Fashion Island will fund an array of community nonprofits helping women of all backgrounds face the physical, emotional and financial challenges of breast cancer.

But few encounter as much adversity as homeless women like Watts.

They can also be the hardest to help.

Sick and homeless

When Watts discovered the lump, she went to a Santa Ana emergency room, hoping to put her mind at ease.

"It got me frightened so bad I couldn't stop thinking about it."

She was directed to see a primary-care doctor covered by her MSI – or Medical Services Initiative, the county's safety-net coverage for the indigent. That doctor referred her for a mammogram at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange.

On a chilly, rainy day, Watts arrived looking gaunt and nervous. She weighed only 83 pounds at 5 feet, 3 inches. Watts ate saltines available in the waiting room and explained to medical staff that she was homeless. She had a cell phone but could only receive messages, not send them or make calls.

Barbara Ginesi, a patient care advocate, collected food from the lunches of her colleagues, plus a blanket, cash and a gift card for Watts.

A biopsy soon confirmed breast cancer, the latest blow in a hard life.

"What did I do to deserve this?" Watts wondered.

Ginesi worked to find a surgical oncologist willing to accept the low reimbursement for treating Watts. (She has since transitioned to state Medi-Cal, which will cover her during her breast cancer treatment.)

Dr. Jay Harness came in on his day off to see her. She would need a lumpectomy to remove the cancer, plus radiation administered in the operating room. They scheduled a pre-op appointment that Watts missed without canceling.

"I was very concerned," Harness said. "The next time she showed up I read her a bit of the Riot Act. I said I could not have her not showing up."

Watts, who is gregarious and quick to smile, said she struggled to keep track of all her appointments because she had so much on her mind. The car she lived in broke down a lot, so she relied on the bus to make her appointments.

Surgery was set for April 16, her 49th birthday. Watts worried about where she could clean up.

"I needed a shower real bad," Watts said. "I have a lot of germs and they're going to cut me open."

Ginesi volunteered to meet Watts at 5 a.m. so she could shower at the hospital. Watts said she felt so special when she saw a basket of towels, lavender soap, shampoo and conditioner, and a bottle of perfume.

"I, to this day, will remember what she looked like – a totally different person," Ginesi said. "I told her, 'You look beautiful.'"

After surgery, Watts gave Harness a thank you card, which has been three-hole punched and added to her medical chart.

"Geraldine's a survivor, but without the tough exterior it takes to survive on the streets," Harness said. "She's very sweet."

Struggles from the start

Watts' first birthday was also a life-changing day.

Her mother had attempted suicide. So on the day she turned 1, her grandmother surrendered her to foster care.

She lived in Lakewood, where she frequently played with the five Watts children who lived across the street. When her foster parents decided to move to the desert, Ron and Helen Watts adopted her at age 11.

Watts ran track and played tennis in high school. As an adult, she started using speed.

But in the last decade, Watts said she gained stability. She married. She worked as a cashier. She became a foster mother to a neighbor's children. She owned a dog.

Her fortunes fell with the crumbling economy. In 2008, her condo in Orange was foreclosed, property records show.

Without a place to live, she could no longer care for the children. She remembers offering a little boy a goodbye gift. He told her that he already had one – learning to read while he lived with her.

"There are things I've done good."

Depressed, she went on Zoloft, but stopped when her insurance ran out. She started using meth again after six years of sobriety.

Watts said she and her husband were panhandling one day when they met a man who rented rooms in a Santa Ana house. They moved in, but she said she got kicked out last fall, barefoot, after her husband attacked her.

Orange County Superior Court records show he pled guilty to one count of misdemeanor domestic battery after he "grabbed my wife by the throat and pushed her."

A friend, Phil, who won't give his last name, offered to let Watts stay with him in his car. The two have since become a couple.

Until her cancer, Watts hid her living situation from her parents, who moved to Wisconsin eight years ago.

"She would just say things weren't going so great," Ron Watts, 72, said. "We told her we'd help her as much as we could. She's made some bad choices in her life. She'd probably be the first to tell you that."

Temporary help

After two surgeries, Watts recovered in a motel as part of the new Orange County Recuperative Care Program, where hospitals pay to discharge homeless patients who have nowhere else to go. In May, the program referred Watts to the nonprofit Breast Cancer Solutions, which helps women cover living expenses while undergoing treatment.

This year, the Santa Ana nonprofit received \$135,000 in Race for the Cure proceeds.

In June, the group agreed to pay for three months' rent for Watts to stay in an Anaheim sober living home. During a mid-August chemotherapy infusion at St. Joseph's cancer center, Watts said how much she loved sleeping in a bed again.

"It's comfortable. It's all mine. I get to sit and think about what I want to think about; read. I don't have anyone bothering me."

She said breast cancer had changed her life, strangely, for the better.

"I'd probably be worse off than I am now," Watts said. "Breast cancer has definitely done nothing but help me. They've put me in a home."

But before her financial assistance ran out at the end of August, Watts stopped sleeping in the room she shared with a roommate.

"My stuff is there but I'm not staying there," she said two weeks ago. "I'm not comfortable there. I'm staying with Phil in his car."

Watts moved her things out in early September.

Jennifer Anderson, program director for Breast Cancer Solutions, said such situations are unfortunate and extremely rare. In the last 12 years, the group has given more than \$3 million to help nearly 1,400 women pay their mortgages, rent or medical expenses.

"The person has to be meeting us halfway," Anderson said. "Our organization isn't going to pay rent for somebody who isn't living in that location. It's a waste of our funders' dollars."

Still, Anderson said the group referred Watts to another housing assistance group. She said that's the policy whenever funding ends and Watts needs a safe place to stay while completing her treatment.

So far, Watts hasn't responded to messages left by a social worker from Breast Cancer Angels in Los Alamitos.

"I'm just hoping she'll call," said founder Faye Dietiker. "She's got four more treatments. I don't want her sleeping in the car. The longer women are homeless, the harder it is for them to get their self respect back and be willing to let someone else help them. We just want her to get well."

Watts said she's feeling fatigued, but is comfortable sleeping in the car, now a Passat, after the Taurus failed a smog inspection.

"It's probably not the safest place and probably not the most healthiest place, but I'm doing good," she said. "There's a lot of people worrying and I'm worrying about myself. I don't know if I'm making the right decisions. It's just hard."

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