

October 10, 2007

## **DAILY PILOT**

Healthy athletic 16-year-old girls aren't supposed to die of breast cancer.

And in this day and age, we would hope that the first diagnosis won't be the one that shows the disease has advanced to Stage IV, which means that it's very advanced, and the survival rate is very low. Women today are so much more informed about the dangers and signs of breast cancer, due to constant reminders about the importance of self-exams and yearly mammograms.

But Andi Collins had inflammatory breast disease, and unfortunately, this rare form of cancer offers none of those easier, telltale symptoms.

The Inflammatory Breast Cancer Research Foundation describes it as "a cancer cursed with misdiagnosis."

Many of the symptoms are overlooked or attributed to other causes.

The obvious, outward signs - rashes, a swollen breast, persistent itching of the breast and nipple, stabbing pain or soreness of the breast - have often been blamed on spider bites, ill-fitting bras, pregnancy or shingles.

In 2002, during Andi's junior year when she was a star volleyball player at Mater Dei High School, she led her team to the state playoffs and a second championship, and then received word in December that she had cancer.

Suffering from what she believed to be a rib-cage pull all season, and fatiguing easily doctors confirmed the diagnosis of inflammatory breast disease that had spread to her brain, liver and spine.

And Collins died in September 2003, after months of intensive chemotherapy and radiation treatments at Hoag Hospital.

Lauren Collins, who took her sister to many of her treatment sessions, met Lil Spitzer, executive director of the Beckstrand Cancer Foundation after Andi's death.

Collins was impressed with what the organization offered cancer patients and their families, and when she suggested forming a group of her peers to reach out to teenage cancer patients, Spitzer was ready and willing to help.

Dr. Grant Beckstrand, a well-known oncologist, founded the Beckstrand Cancer Foundation in Long Beach in 1974. Lauren Collins and two of her best friends from high school, sisters Veronica and Stephanie Muth, established The Four Pearls - an auxiliary branch of the Beckstrand Cancer Foundation - in 2006.

The girls will remember what they went through with Andi, and have a vision, Collins said.

"We are the beginning of Four Pearls - three here...one in heaven." Their goal was to focus on teens living with cancer.

Collins said the good news is that more and more teenagers are surviving cancer, but the after-effects of the disease - both physically and emotionally - need to be addressed, and through research and fundraising events, they are reaching out to that age group.

The Beckstrand Cancer Foundation hosts an annual Diamond & Pearl Ball each year, and last year's honoree was Andi Collins.

The ball is a fundraiser, and Spitzer said the amount of support and love in the room was a direct reflection of the love and support people had for Andi.

Lauren Collins said there still hasn't been enough progress made in the fight against inflammatory breast disease, and that just weeks ago she came across a blog from a woman in Philadelphia who had recently been diagnosed with the disease.

She described herself as a "punk-rock mommy" with six kids.

She had no symptoms, and was told at the time of her diagnosis that her cancer had reached the fourth stage.

Coincidentally, her name is Andrea Collins.