

KEEPING FAITH;REPORTER FANCHER CONTINUES HER BATTLE WITH CANCER Contra Costa Times (California) July 24, 2001 Tuesday FINAL EDITION

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WHAT IS IT LIKE to be **Faith Fancher**? What is it like to be a woman who has discovered cancer growing in her body on three separate occasions, has genetically altered cow tissue beneath a skin graft and travels weekly to a Berkeley hospital for a dose of cancer treatment that knocks her out for two days?

According to her, it's to be "blessed."

That's a word the KTVU news reporter uses over and over to describe her life.

And when she strides into the Alta Bates Comprehensive Cancer Center for her weekly treatment, as she did on a recent day in late June, she greets everyone with a laugh and a hug as if she's attending a wedding reception.

"This is the nicest place you never want to come," she says with a characteristic laugh.

Earlier in the day, in her modest home in the Oakland hills, she talked about her battle with breast cancer and her decision to be public about it. Dressed in jeans and a pink T-shirt, she didn't look like a powerhouse Emmy-winning TV reporter. But her journalistic experience had led her to make an important decision: to share her journey through treatment with her viewers. KTVU/Fox Channel 2 aired the first segments of "Faith's Story" in May 1997, with follow-up coverage later that year and again in 1998 and 2000.

"I thought OK, I'm a public figure, people trust me.' I felt like it was just my turn to step up, because so many people have shared private things with me," she said. "I mean, I was here for the earthquake, the fire."

She pointed to the recent story about the Richmond boy who was attacked by pit bulls.

"That would be the kind of story where you'd have to go and ask the parents if they were willing to talk to you, and knock on a few doors and say, I'm really sorry about what happened, and do you want to talk about it?' So I figured I've done that and so many people have said yes to me, that it was my turn."

And luckily it was her good friend, and co-worker at the time, former KTVU anchorwoman Elaine Corral Kendall who told the story.

"I thought a great deal about what I could do for her. So I called her up, and I asked her if it would help her if she could help others while she was going through it, it would ultimately come back around and help her," said Kendall, who wrote and produced the coverage.

"There are certain parts of the segment that I still cannot watch," said Fancher, 50. "One is with my mom, and she starts crying it's very hard for me to watch that."

One positive response has been Friends of Faith, an organization she founded to provide mini-grants to local organizations that fight breast cancer. It has already raised \$500,000.

Fancher, in the midst of treatment, devotes her time to speaking engagements and keynotes to get the word out about early detection.

Three diagnoses

Fancher last worked at KTVU Dec. 24, 2000, and if her present treatment goes well, she'll return at the end of February 2002.

Her odyssey began in 1997 when a mammogram showed a lump. A lumpectomy and mastectomy left her cancer-free for two and half years, until she discovered another mass herself.

"I have a habit of putting glasses in the collar of my shirt, and I felt something," she said. "I said, Noooooo.' I felt it again. Noooo.' I got in my car and started to drive, and I had to pull over."

A biopsy proved her right. "It's hard to describe," Fancher said of receiving the news. "It's so otherworldly. It takes a couple of days to really deal with it."

Starting in July 1999, she underwent 48 rounds of radiation and six months of chemotherapy in two blocks and again considered herself free and clear. Her treatment ended in February 2000 and a scant three months later she found another lump.

Fortunately, it was benign. However, because of previous radiation treatment her breast tissue did not regenerate after the lump's removal, and she was left with a literal hole in her chest.

"It was strange you could see into it, see the raw tissue in there. They were packing it with sterile seaweed." That's when Fancher received the cow-tissue plug, covered by a skin graft.

By September 2000, Fancher was back at work and again three months was a short stretch of elation. In December, regular blood tests showed she had the her-2-nu positive protein; 30 percent of women in the United States with breast cancer have this kind of protein.

"It hit me so hard, and I didn't think it would do that, and I went to work. I was talking to the assistant assignment editor and I just started crying. I just couldn't control it." She didn't yet have a positive diagnosis "but I just had that feeling."

She was right: A soft tissue scan revealed lesions in her liver her third bout with cancer.

On the forefront

Fancher has always been on the frontier: She was the first African-American on the local TV news in her native Tennessee, beating Oprah Winfrey by several months, and the first African-American woman in CNN's Washington, D.C., bureau.

And now she was ready to be among the first to try a new cancer treatment: the combination of herceptin and navelbine. She is in a national test group.

"African-Americans are very reluctant to take part in medical studies because of the history, you know remember Tuskegee," she said, referring to the infamous "study" conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service from 1932-1972, where poor black sharecroppers suffering from syphilis were deliberately denied treatment.

After talking over the study with three important people in her life her husband, Bill Drummond; her physician, Dr. Martha Tracy; and the manager of the research department at the cancer center, Beth Davis she decided to participate.

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"Faith has always been eager to try anything that will give her the best chance to control her tumor," said Davis.

Fancher continues to remain upbeat despite all her health problems.

"Never, ever did I hear this woman complain," said Kendall. "She had a smile on her face going into surgery!"

"It's that positive attitude (that explains) why she is a survivor."

**Faith Fancher** will be part of Breast Cancer Awareness Day Sept. 22 at the Oakland A's game; call 510-762-BALL or visit [www.oaklandathletics.com](http://www.oaklandathletics.com). She will deliver the keynote speech at "From Research to Action: Breast Cancer Research Symposium 2001," Sept. 14 and 15 at the Oakland Marriott City Center; call 888-313-BCRP or visit [www.ucop.edu/srphome/bcrp/](http://www.ucop.edu/srphome/bcrp/). She will also moderate the Northern California Cancer Center's event "Ending the Silence-Sounding the Alarm!" Sept. 29 at the Marriott; call 510-429-2504 or visit [www.nccc.org](http://www.nccc.org).

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**GRAPHIC:** Photo, **Faith Fancher** reviews blood tests with Maria Novida, RN. (Joanna Jhanda, Times)

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