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IN SICKNESS AND HEALTH Fighting breast cancer times two

BY EVAN HENERSON>LA.COM

Paul and June Canter can certainly think of better ways to strengthen an already solid marriage than sharing the same life-threatening illness.

But the Canters' diagnoses of breast cancer - five years apart - meant that each partner would have an enhanced understanding of what the other would experience.

Not to mention a very real respect for the value of irony.

"We had to laugh about it, because if not, it would have been so serious," says June Canter, 57. "I make a joke that the couple that has breast cancer together, stays together. Our fame isn't winning the Lotto. We have breast cancer together."

Make that "had." Following six months of endocrine therapy and chemotherapy, June was declared cancer-free in October 2005. Two weeks later, Paul noticed a lump near the nipple of his breast. He underwent a double mastectomy and has also been pronounced free of the disease.

"For me, it doesn't exist," says Paul, 68, who, with June, operates the Allan Edwards Hair Salon in Encino. "It was something that happened, and it's something that I went through. Now it's gone. That's my mentality."

Matter-of-factness aside, neither husband nor wife downplays the seriousness of their respective experiences. Still, the Canters' battle with cancer could serve as a model to others facing a similar

situation, says the doctor who treated Paul.

"They're very stylish, well-informed and capable," says Dr. Helen Mabry, assistant director of the John Wayne Cancer Institute Breast Center at St. John's Health Center in Santa Monica. "They've maintained good humor and good cheer throughout this whole experience, which is extremely rare and commendable."

There's no way to prepare for a cancer diagnosis, but June Canter had given the matter some thought after watching her mother die of lung cancer over a two-year period.

June figured that she wouldn't be able to match her mother's bravery. Then she discovered a lump, received her diagnosis and while her husband broke down in tears - went into action.

"I said, 'I'll do anything. Do I need a double mastectomy? Let's do it right now. You name it,'" says June. "I went through it like a trouper. I couldn't even believe myself."

June would have a lumpectomy. The chemotherapy was punishing, but husband and wife would go to the treatments together, punctuating the experience with regular special lunches and a celebratory dinner once the cycle was complete.

Shortly thereafter, Paul, too, was diagnosed. With the knowledge he had gained through June's experience, Paul elected to skip the protocol of a face-to-face



Paul and June Canter fought breast cancer together — first hers, then his.

meeting to confirm the diagnosis, insisting instead that he be telephoned with the results of his tests.

He also decided on a double mastectomy rather than eliminating the cancer in one breast and risk having the disease return.

Paul had undergone a heart transplant in January 2005. Further tests revealed that a steady dose of tamoxifen would be an equally or more effective course of treatment than chemotherapy, the latter of which might have presented complications related to the transplant.

Breast cancer in men is far less common than in women, says Mabry, who estimates that there are 2,000 cases of the disease in

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"A woman has to go through her femininity: Is my husband going to like my body without breasts," says June. "It's so much different for a man than for a woman. And Paul has such a wonderful attitude that nothing is too much for him."

Still, returning to St. John's as a patient rather than the spouse of a patient was "a dose of reality" for Paul, particularly the first time he was handed the slip of paper and told to proceed next door to get his blood work.

"He was watching me do it all the time, and now it was him," June says. "When we go in together every six months, I'm in one room, and he's in another. It's almost like a cruel joke."

The Canters both acted quickly to confirm their diagnoses and consider their options. They advise people who think they might have cancer to do the same.

"People go into denial," June says. "Don't sit and wait and watch. If you feel something, run. Get three opinions, but run. Be proactive in your checkups, don't bury your head in the sand, and that can save your life."

To which her husband replies, simply, "Ditto."

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men in the United States per year. Male mastectomy procedures frequently don't require reconstruction, and any scars often can be hidden by chest hair.

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