Written by Stephanie Groves Friday, June 21, 2013 12:05 AM -

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DELPHOS — In the past 11 years, Mike and Sandy Gray have both been diagnosed with cancer and taken on the roles of cancer survivor and caregiver.

A year ago, Sandy was diagnosed with breast cancer. Mike was in the doctor's office with her and instantaneously went into a caregiving mode, asking questions, getting all the facts and making sure Sandy understood all the information.

"He kept asking me 'Do you hear what they said'," Sandy relived the moment. "If he would not have been there, I would not have remembered much of what they said."

She began a course of 32 radiation treatments in August, which lasted through mid-October. In retrospect, Sandy felt the timing was good since the close-knit family shares the love of OSU football season and just went on with life as normal.

"I joined a sorority for women you don't wanna join," Sandy said. "When the roles are reversed,

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you don't know which is worse."

Throughout Sandy's treatments, Bentley, the dog the Grays adopted through Angels For Animals almost seven years ago, sensed the stress she was feeling. Bentley would stay close to her and lay just within an arm's reach or up against her.

"I would get up in the middle of the night, decide to read and see him peeking around the corner at me," Sandy said. "It was nice to reach down and have him there."

A friend made Bentley a bandanna from Breast Cancer Awareness material—pink with ribbons—which he wore the whole time Sandy was in treatment.

Prior to beginning treatments, Sandy had a novel idea, which was to create a visual symbol representing her countdown to health. She tied a pink ribbon to a crystal jar filled with 32 Hershey Kisses. After each treatment, she came home and ate one Kiss.

"Those Kisses became very meaningful to me," Sandy explained further. "It was uplifting to have that little reward that meant 'one more down'."

Finding out that Mike had prostate cancer in 2002 was a fluke diagnosis. He had been experiencing frequent trips to the bathroom and decided to see a urologist who ordered a Transurethral Resection of the Prostate (TURP) for Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia. In short, the procedure involves removing the section of the prostate that is blocking urine flow. The procedure is now the most common surgery used to remove part of an enlarged prostate.

After Mike's surgery, his specimen was sent to a Cleveland clinic to investigate suspicious cells that may be cancer.

"I was 56 at the time and not that old," Mike stated. "Since it was not advanced, it would not have shown up in a diagnosis for 10 years."

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After the diagnosis was confirmed, Mike began a regimen of 39 radiation treatments. Although the procedure was draining, he still managed to work everyday. Once all treatments were complete, Mike recovered to feel pretty normal in 2-3 weeks. "When he was going through that, we were extremely nervous, scared, worried and although I was supportive, there was a deep feeling of helplessness," Sandy said.

"Surprising things came out of being diagnosed," Mike detailed. "St. Rita's approached me to participate in a commercial about prostate cancer."

Mike and his two sons were in the PSA, which was set on a golf course and a natural setting for the Grays' sons who are avid golfers. The airing prompted 600 men to get tested and of those tested, 40 of them had prostate cancer.

"One thing it let both my boys know is they need to get checked," Mike said adamantly. "Early detection is key. Stay on top of it because it can save your life."

Both Mike and Sandy agreed that each time they were sitting in a doctor's office, nervous and anticipating the results of tests, as soon as they heard "cancer" the conversation stopped and a process of caregiving began.

The couple said the experience of living through a cancer diagnosis brought them much closer in ways only others in the same situation could possibly grasp.

"It made us appreciate each other so much more — as cancer survivors and caregivers," Sandy said.

Mike and Sandy are unable to attend the Bark for Life of Delphos from 2-5 p.m. Saturday at Leisure Park but are avid supporters of the event. They both agree Bentley was a caregiver for Sandy while she went through her treatments and recovery.

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If you are an underinsured or uninsured man or woman and need assistance with mammogram screenings, please visit www.komennwohio.org or call 419-724-2873 or 1-877-465-6636 for information or to schedule a mammogram funded by the Northwest Ohio Affiliate of Susan G. Komen for the Cure® in Toledo. Further resources include Komen's National Breast Care Helpline where information can be found about breast health and breast cancer concerns; please call 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636).