

Family with a fighting mission

■ The Olivers battle breast cancer with 'An Ounce of Prevention'

By IDA CHIPMAN
Tribune Correspondent

PLYMOUTH

The Oliver family is taking it personally. Jennifer Oliver Houin and her sister, Jessica Oliver, lost both their grandmothers to breast cancer within a two-year span.

Christine Oliver died in 1995 and Ruth Berger in 1999.

"That's when the terrible epidemic of breast cancer began to come into focus for us," Jennifer said.

But it got worse.

"Michelle, our brother John's wife, at the age of 33, was diagnosed with stage 3 of the dreaded disease," she added.

Michelle and John Oliver III were married in 1986. They have two children, Sydney, age 8, and Jeffrey, 5.

Shortly after the birth of Jeffrey in 2000, Michelle noticed that she bruised easily.

No big deal, she thought.

Then in the summer of 2002, she became aware that her left breast was swollen and had grown considerably larger.

"Not enough to see the doctor," she said. She figured it had something to do with her having nursed her babies.

"I had no pain," she said, "and there is no history of breast cancer in my family."

She religiously did regular self-breast exams and never felt a lump, so she did what many would do.

She ignored it.

The day before Thanksgiving, three years ago, Michelle kept her yearly checkup appointment with her gynecologist.

She asked him about the engorgement of her breast. He found, doing his routine examination, a lump.

She underwent two biopsies. The news was bad. She was diagnosed with stage 3 infiltrating ductile carcinoma with lymph nodes involved.

"I never cried," she said, "even when they told me about the four stages of cancer."

"In stage 4, all they can do is make you comfortable, so stage 3 is really bad."

The first step in her treatment was to attempt to shrink the mass with chemotherapy.

For four sessions, three weeks apart, Michelle underwent chemotherapy in the oncology department of Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center in Plymouth.



Tribune Photo: IDA CHIPMAN

The Oliver family of Plymouth is working together to support breast cancer research. From left are Jennifer Houin, Michelle Oliver and Jessica Oliver.

"It was pretty awful," she said. "I was so sick."

"To complicate matters, and we laugh about it now, both kids got the vomiting flu the night following my first chemo."

"John was running around the house all night with towels, mopping up throw-up."

The treatment was successful. The tumor shrank from 5 to less than 1 centimeter. She underwent a partial radical mastectomy, removing her left breast.

A year later, as a precautionary measure, her right breast was also surgically removed.

Next month she will have a total hysterectomy.

At 7 p.m. on Saturday, at Swan Lake

Resort, the Oliver girls will host, "An Ounce of Prevention," the third annual breast cancer awareness and fundraising event.

The goal is to raise \$50,000. One hundred percent of the proceeds will be invested locally, supporting breast cancer efforts at Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center of Plymouth.

In addition to wine and cheese refreshments, there will be entertainment by Gary Treat's Flood Stage band. An auction called by Kelly and Mindy

Hoffman will feature many items donated by business owners from Culver and Plymouth.

A video will be shown. It was filmed by Brian McCormack, a video photog-

rapher and owner of Papa's Restaurant in Culver, who recently lost his mother to cancer.

Called "WIN," the video is the story of Michelle Oliver, as both a cancer patient and survivor. Made into DVDs, the documentary will be given to every local woman diagnosed with cancer.

"Michelle is doing wonderfully well," Jennifer said. "She has really pitched in on this fundraiser."

"Research on breast cancer is vital," Michelle added. "Every dime we can put into research will bring a cure that much faster."

Valet parking at Swan Lake will be provided by members of the Plymouth Rockie football team.

The boys, to show support for the fundraising program, have had their heads shaved for the occasion.

Major sponsors for the event, partnering with Oliver Ford Lincoln Mercury are Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center of Plymouth, Town and Country Press, and Swan Lake Resort.

An ounce of help

Tax-deductible admission tickets for "An Ounce of Prevention" are \$35 per person in advance or \$45 per person at the door. Tickets are available through Oliver Ford Dealership employees Kelsey Flynn, Tammy Greenlee, Micky Hoffer, Laura Mann, Lisa Rhodes or Gwen Taylor. For more information, contact Jennifer at (574) 948-0820 or Jessica at (574) 930-1404.