

“The Closest Thing to a Miracle”

Elaine Porter just found out her double mastectomy was unnecessary — and she feels really good. Genetic testing at UCLA’s Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center this year showed she is no more at risk for cancer than most women. But she didn’t know that a dozen years ago, when she had her healthy breasts removed.

“I have no sense of regret about having had the mastectomies,” she says. “It’s given me years of peace of mind. I would have spent all that time worrying. The only thing I would change would be being able to breast feed my kids, but that’s minor relative to being sure I would be alive for them.”

Generally speaking, cancer is not a hereditary disease. But if a person has two or more close relatives who have had the same type of cancer, his or her chances for cancer increase.

Porter is a picture-perfect at-risk woman. Her mother, two maternal aunts, one maternal cousin, a maternal great grandmother and two great aunts all died from breast or ovarian cancer.

She grew up fearing cancer. At the age of 26, to lower her risk, she chose to have both her normal breasts surgically removed.

Porter is a mom right out of the Brady bunch. A registered nurse, she willingly traded her career for full-time motherhood. She lives in Newbury Park, Calif., with her very supportive husband, Robert, their two blond, effervescent boys, Matthew, 2, and Joseph, 4, and an unflappable gray cat named Lucky.

Their two-story home in a gated community is kid-oriented, with a tent and a slide in the living room and a back yard full of play equipment.

Porter is a pretty, young (she’s 38, but looks a lot more like 28), vivacious, well-adjusted, happy, optimistic woman.

One big reason for her optimism rests with the Familial Cancer Registry at UCLA’s Jonsson Cancer Center. It was there that, despite her abysmal family history for cancer, Porter recently found she does not have the mutation that apparently caused the disease in her maternal relatives.

“For years before my genetic test, I was so afraid, given what had happened in my family,” she says. “My family doesn’t have a good record of surviving this stuff. I felt like a time bomb.”

Porter joined the Familial Cancer Registry last year, after talking with its director, Dr. Patricia Ganz, at the Revlon/UCLA Breast Center’s High Risk Program.

“Dr. Ganz and I discussed genetic testing a couple of years ago,”



Elaine and Robert Porter spend free time with sons Matthew and Joseph.

Porter recalls. “But we put it on the back burner because I didn’t know of a living family member with cancer.”

Without knowing what gene is mutated, it is difficult and uncertain to predict a woman’s chances for cancer by genetic testing. But when the genetic mutation causing the cancer in a family member is known, it becomes much easier to test another person in the same family to see if she has that same mutation. If she does, her risk for cancer is substantially above average.

About a year after talking with Dr. Ganz, Porter was considering having her ovaries removed to further decrease her chances of getting cancer.

Before taking such a drastic step, she decided to undergo genetic testing to try to see if she was susceptible to cancer, even though she realized the results would not be conclusive, since she knew of no living family member with the disease.

UCLA’s Familial Cancer Registry requires an extensive family history to verify which relatives have been cancer patients. In the process of compiling that history, Porter called a cousin with whom she hadn’t talked in years.

The cousin had breast cancer. She agreed to have genetic testing, and came up positive for a mutation in the BRCA1 gene. BRCA stands for “BREast CAncer.”

Now Ganz knew to look for the same BRCA1 mutation in Porter’s genetic testing. Ganz looked. The mutation wasn’t there.

“I was stunned,” Porter says, the normal lilt in her voice increasing to approach euphoria. “I expected all along that I had the gene. I was *sure* I did. When I found out it wasn’t there, I was thrilled. I was overjoyed. I was sort of speechless. I kept having to pinch myself to be sure I wasn’t dreaming. I got home and I kept thinking, did that really happen to me or did I just dream it?”

“It wasn’t a dream, of course. It was the closest thing to a miracle I’ve ever known. For the first time ever, I feel like I have a long, happy life in front of me.”

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If you think you think you may qualify for the **Familial Cancer Registry** at UCLA’s Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center, or if you would like more information about the registry, please call Joyce Seldon at **(310) 794-7576**.