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What worked for me: Annabell Barnes, 85, Carmel

Faith helps woman survive several illnesses

As told to Star reporter Barb Berggoetz

I was first diagnosed in 1976 with throat cancer, then in 1994 with breast cancer, and finally in 2000 I was diagnosed with kidney cancer and had one kidney removed. I also had a heart problem -- blockage and one stent. But with medication and diet, I'm doing fine with that.

When I had breast surgery, by the grace of God, I handled it well because I didn't tell everybody. At that time, if anybody had cancer, they thought you were going to die. I didn't want people to feel sorry for me. Only my husband and brother knew; I don't have children. I felt I was in the hands of the Lord and whatever is going to be is going to be.

But all this time I could raise my left arm only to shoulder height. I had a tightness in the muscles. I've babied that arm since 1994. It hurt like a sprain.

I read in the newspaper about the Indy SurviveOars, a group of breast cancer survivors who want to dragon boat race, and I asked to be a paddler. I'd never even been in a canoe. I don't swim. But I've been through a lot of cancer and sickness, and I'm still able to take care of myself. I thought maybe some of the younger ones who are feeling down about breast cancer can see that I can do this, and then they would feel better and inspired.

It's a wonderful group. Everybody is uplifted. It's really the best thing for me. I've walked on the treadmill 30 minutes a day because of my heart. I've built up my strength, and it's helped my breathing, posture and muscle strength.

We started training last October, practicing paddling out of the water. Since February, we've been paddling while sitting at the side of a pool on mats. We are going to compete in July against other teams of breast cancer survivors at a festival in Canada.

The first day we were in the boat about two weeks ago, I was a little nervous. But I had a life jacket on, so I had no fear. It was great. I feel like I'm keeping up with rest of them.

As told to Barb Berggoetz at barb.berggoetz@indystar.com
