

Katie Johnson: Good morning. Welcome to Apple a Day Lake Region Healthcare's Health and Wellness Segment where we give you news and information that you can use to live a healthier life. This is Katie Johnson, your host, and I have as my guest today Kathy Wark. She is a colorectal cancer patient joining us here this morning for Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. Good morning, Kathy.

Kathy Wark: Good morning.

Katie Johnson: Thank you so much for taking some time to join us and share your story with us. We're so grateful that you're willing to do that. I'd like to start by asking you, what made you say, "Yes," when we asked, "Would you be willing to share your story with us?"

Kathy Wark: The reason why I said, "Yes," is I feel that colon cancer is not brought up to the forefront like it should be. There is an awful lot of breast cancer, which there should be, but colon cancer is the number two killer, and it really needs to be exposed for what it is, and it's just an all around terrible, terrible cancer that is so subtle that if you don't pay attention to your body, it sneaks up on you and there you sit with it.

Katie Johnson: You mentioned it's very subtle.

Kathy Wark: It is.

Katie Johnson: Could you tell us about your diagnosis, how that came about and when?

Kathy Wark: I have always had stomach issues. I was diagnosed in 2014, but prior, about a year, a good year prior to my being diagnosed with it, my stomach problems increased, but not a lot, but enough that it sent me to the doctor. The first question that Dr. Berger asked me was, "Have you had a colonoscopy?" I said, "No." He said, "I suggest you have a colonoscopy." I said, "No." It kept going. It kept going until I just couldn't ignore the symptoms anymore. I was the one then that went, literally walked into Internal Medicine after work one day and said, "I need a colonoscopy."

Katie Johnson: Tell us about what that was like and how the diagnosis came about after the colonoscopy.

Kathy Wark: It was Dr. Gutzmer that performed the colonoscopy. I was scared to death, which is really ... There's no reason to feel that way whatsoever. You are asleep. You don't feel it. The prep is not so much fun, but I was more terrified of the procedure. After the procedure, I had my daughter with me. I woke up to Dr. Gutzmer sitting next to me, and the first words out of her mouth when she knew I was lucid enough to understand was, "You have cancer." My daughter panicked. My husband passed away with brain cancer, and my mother had died from lung cancer. I have an aunt

who passed away from colon cancer. When I woke up and knew that Dr. Gutzmer was there, I knew that there was something wrong with me before I ever had the procedure.

When she told me, "You have cancer," those are the hardest three words you can ever hear. My daughter, "Oh, no," and I thought, "Oh, it's okay, honey. You know, it's okay. I'm not going to die. Refuse to die. I can't die." Come on. It just went from there.

Katie Johnson: Once you got that diagnosis, then what was treatment like? What did treatment involve for you from that point forward?

Kathy Wark: Dr. Gutzmer set everything up for me, which was wonderful. Then I went in and I met Dr. Barnes, who is the radiation oncologist, beautiful, beautiful doctor. Dr. Swanson is my oncologist, my cancer oncologist. Our Cancer Center is absolutely phenomenal. Wonderful people work there. From the navigator, Tammy, sat down and they bring you in, they sit you down. Day one to the end, they sit down and they discuss with you, they told me who my surgeon was going to be. I had surgery. I was in the hospital for eight days. I went home. I feel that I healed very quickly because I was back to work in seven weeks.

Katie Johnson: Wow.

Kathy Wark: Or was it eight weeks? Seven or eight weeks, I don't remember, but it's easier to have a colonoscopy than it is to go through the chemo and radiation and surgery, so get checked.

Katie Johnson: That is a great message. What would you say helped you through all of that? Going through the chemo and the radiation and the surgery you said was a difficult time. What helped you get through?

Kathy Wark: Family and friends, faith, a lot of faith. I do believe in that. After I had my surgery, I woke up. Even though I lost my husband, I didn't lose his family, and there's all my in-laws around the bed. There sat my son holding my hand. I had a lot of support. A lot of friends were there for me. That's everything. It really is.

Katie Johnson: For sure. You look absolutely fabulous.

Kathy Wark: Thank you.

Katie Johnson: How is your journey going today?

Kathy Wark: So far, so good.

Katie Johnson: Cancer-free?

Kathy Wark: Cancer-free, cancer-free. I am back in the gym. I am back exercising. I hit the gym

three, four times a week, hour a day.

Katie Johnson: Good for you.

Kathy Wark: I had to. I was turning into a blab.

Katie Johnson: You were focused on other things.

Kathy Wark: I was focused on other things.

Katie Johnson: Absolutely. What would you say to someone who says they're afraid of getting a colonoscopy?

Kathy Wark: I understand. I understand completely. Please do it. Do not put it off, especially if you noticing things about your body that you haven't noticed before. Do it. Like I said, it's much easier to have a colonoscopy than it is to go through the chemo, the radiation, and the surgery. One thing I would like to say, I do belong to a couple of support groups, colon cancer support groups. Within these groups, there are young people, 29. It doesn't know any age. What I would like to see happen is have people tested well before 50, well before 50. Start testing them at 35, especially if there's a history.

Katie Johnson: I was going to say that. Family history is a really important thing to know and to have screening at an early age if you have the family history of colon cancer. That's a really good message to pass along. You've mentioned in other conversations, you have a pay it forward kind of philosophy in your life. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that means to you?

Kathy Wark: It means everything. When I was going through radiation, I met a gal there who was going through radiation for breast cancer, and we just talked, had a nice time. People are there. When you come in to go through your radiation, people are in the middle or they're ending or they're starting their radiation treatments. This gal was towards the very end. I had gone in there one day, talking to her and expecting to talk to her. She looked at me and she said, "Today is my last radiation." "Oh, yay, good for you." Hug, hug, hug. Then before she left, she came up to me and she gave me this big hug and she said, "Thank you." I said, "For what?" She said, "For making me laugh." She said, "For just being you." I thought, "Oh, that's it." That is what prompted me to also try and make other people feel good and to feel comfortable and to try not worry as much if possible.

I handed out Valentine's over at the Cancer Center. I handed a couple to one patient who was in fusion, and she looked at it and, "Looks just like my dog." They enjoyed them. It made me feel good. It's just little things, just little things, not much.

Katie Johnson: You've paid it forward by doing this interview with us and sharing your story with us and hopefully inspiring our listeners to be more attentive to their family history,

to their need for screening, and less fearful of that screening process.

Kathy Wark: If there is anything that I can do to pay it forward, that is to tell people, "Please, please get screened. Don't put it off. It's not as bad as you think it is."

Katie Johnson: You're here to continue spreading joy and living your life and being there for your family. You're still-

Kathy Wark: I'm still alive.

Katie Johnson: Fantastic. Kathy Wark, our guest today during Colon Cancer Awareness Month with her personal story of her colorectal cancer diagnosis and journey. Thank you so much for sharing your story with us this morning, Kathy.

Kathy Wark: You're welcome. I enjoyed it. Thank you.

Katie Johnson: Thank you. Kathy Wark and Katie Johnson with you this morning on Apple a Day and both of us do remind you there is so much to do here. Get screened and stay healthy for it. Have a great day.