

High school history teacher Karen Branzell wants to experience life to the fullest—the good, the bad and the ugly. She'd had plenty of good—good friends, beautiful children, doting husband, exhilarating career.

As for the ugly, a routine mammogram showed breast cancer. Just a speed bump in her life as far as she was concerned. A pretty aggressive speed bump, though. Her tumor was a Stage 3 non-estrogen sensitive cancer. Approximately 80% of breast cancer cases are estrogen-sensitive (the cancer cells are dependent on hormones). The other 20% of cases don't depend on hormones. (American Association for Cancer Research). This meant that hormone therapy—used to interfere with cancer cells, slowing or stopping tumor growth or preventing recurrence. This meant that Karen's treatment was just going to be a little more difficult.

Luckily, it had not spread to her lymph nodes. Karen's care was carefully coordinated through Breast Health Program of the Women's Care at St. Pat's and the Montana Cancer Center.

At first, she wanted to keep her cancer a secret—thinking that keeping it close to herself would be easier than the exposure to everyone. But when she found out she would be undergoing chemotherapy, her immediate thought—“What about my hair!” That she couldn't keep from her students. And they noticed she was out of the classroom more.

So just like the educator she is, she used her experience to teach her juniors and seniors. That cancer was something that was part of life. Six rounds of chemo, 33 daily sessions of radiation. Goofy Christmas hats, huge pink hats with big bows and gigantic wigs. Another teacher who had breast cancer came forward and told her students. And once the students knew about Karen's cancer, the community of Florence came together to help her

The students in Key Club, a community service organization, organized the “Bras for the Cause” event, where people could create artistic bras that would be auctioned off to help the support breast cancer research. Fifty-two bras, including an Alge”bra” from the math teacher,

Karen was cold and miserable during chemo. When they heard about this, two church groups got together and made a prayer shawl for Karen to wear during her treatment.

“We find out how much people care for us when we come down with something like this. It's a part of life, but it makes me step back and think about how so many people are dealing with issues with this and we never know it,” Karen says.

Her co-workers cooked her food and cleaned her house, students in the learning centers sold pink bracelets to donate money for the cause, and friends and family drove her from her home in Florence to every doctor's appointment and treatment. She continued to attend her yoga classes with her friends—even when she felt at her worst. They didn't shy away from asking her questions and wanting to know what was happening.

Then one day, after treatment, Karen showed up for school with no hat, no scarf. She felt her hair was just long enough to unveil. Her students were surprised and happy. And offered advice that she use pink or red mousse in her new short hair.

“I hope I showed my students that these things happen in life. You just have to deal with the bumps in the road.”