

Cheryl Anderson column: Grateful cancer survivor reworks massage practice

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Cheri Leonard's had a tough year. But the 55-year-old Seymour woman says with God's help she finally has returned full time to her job — this time with a new vision.

The licensed massage therapist and owner of the Massage Spot in Buchanan not only won her battle with breast cancer but in addition to her regular practice is now helping cancer, mastectomy and breast cancer patients as well as those with HIV/AIDS by offering a different form of slow, gentle massage and bodywork.

"I believe God had me experience breast cancer so I could help others with their journey," said Leonard, who recently earned the new certification from the Blue Sky School of Professional Massage in Grafton. "I feel better when I'm helping people."

Leonard's niece, Lacey Braun, organized a motorcycle ride and cookout in honor of her aunt and all breast cancer survivors called Lambeau Leap Over Breast Cancer through the LeRoy Butler Foundation. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m. today at

Mister G's in Appleton. The ride begins between 10:30 and 11 a.m. and is followed by a noon cookout. Proceeds go to the LeRoy Butler Foundation.

"I don't think there is a thing in the world that could knock her down," Braun, 24, of Appleton, said of her aunt.

Learning massage was a long-held dream for Leonard, who graduated in 2003 from the Fox Valley School of Massage in Appleton. She worked two years at Massage Connection in Appleton before starting her own business.

Leonard's large practice suddenly came to a near-halt in June 2010 with the diagnosis of breast cancer in her right breast. It was a precancerous condition and the most common type of noninvasive breast cancer.

When a lumpectomy was performed, the doctor found more cancer there than originally thought. So a second lumpectomy was to be performed, although Leonard, who has lived with the pain of fibrocystic

breast disease for years, preferred to have a double mastectomy so she could get on with her life and work. At the time, the doctor disagreed.

Even more cancer was found in the margins of her right breast after the second lumpectomy; it had to be removed.

"If you're going to do that, take the other one," she told her doctor, who agreed but shied away from removing Leonard's right sentinel lymph node.

If the sentinel node was removed Leonard probably would not have been able to return to work, and the surgeon knew that. Patients having the procedure are at a high risk of developing lymphedema, a debilitating progressive condition with no known cure.

But the surgeon had a change of heart the day of surgery. On the advice of other doctors, she decided instead to take the right sentinel lymph node.

"I didn't argue with her. I knew she had my best interest in mind," Leonard said. "I told her if she felt that she needed to do that I was OK with it. I wasn't happy, but I was going to be rid of the cancer and still live a normal life."

As Leonard was wheeled to surgery, she said she spoke to God. "I told him if this is what his plan for me was, I would accept it. I was happy to be alive, going to be cancer free and not have chemo or radiation, and that was enough. I asked that if he was going to close this door on me — the work

that I loved so much — that when I was healthy again to please open another door where I could continue to help others. And then I went to sleep."

When she awoke after surgery, her doctor came in with good news; although she spent a lot of time looking, she could not find Leonard's sentinel node and just performed the double mastectomy.

"I can't even describe the feelings of happiness and gratitude that were running through me," Leonard said. "God hid my sentinel lymph node on her so she couldn't find it; there was my sign. I was going to be able to go back to my work, and I was so happy."

But her trials weren't over just yet. A lingering infection and a tumor-like swelling complicated matters. So did a January fall in which she injured her right elbow. Breast reconstructive surgery came in May, followed by a month off.

Leonard finally returned to work full time

after Memorial Day, thanks to her husband, Tom, who picked up all business expenses during his wife's downtime so she'd have a business to return to.

Leonard, who was raised Catholic, views herself as spiritual.

"There is a God out there," she said. "He's easy to talk to and I've got a good relationship with him. ... When I have a problem I know he's listening. I could feel the times he was carrying me. I could feel his arms around at times when I was really bad, and I would feel better. I could feel him giving me a hug."

If you go

WHAT: Leroy Butler Foundation Lambeau Leap Over Breast Cancer motorcycle ride and cookout featuring a visit by LeRoy Brown

WHEN: Today, registration for motorcycle ride at 8:30 a.m. with the ride taking off about 10:30 a.m. Cookout at noon.

WHERE: Begins and ends at Mister G's, 340 W. Northland Ave., Appleton

COST: \$20 per rider, \$35 per couple. The cookout is \$5 for riders and nonriders.

OTHER ACTIVITIES: Raffles, silent auction, dunk tank, [karaoke](#), paddlewheel games

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