

‘Exceptional’ breast cancer care

MAIN LINE HEALTH EXPERTS WHO HELPED A YOUNG WOMAN CONQUER HER CANCER SHOW WHY THE BEST TREATMENT IS PERSONALIZED

In September 2018, life was full for Anastasia Colletti. The healthy, active Havertown resident was enjoying her career as an X-ray technician, spending time with friends—and had just celebrated her 26th birthday. Then she found a lump in her breast.

Colletti saw her Main Line Health nurse practitioner, Melanie Winter, CRNP, who referred her for a mammogram and an ultrasound. After testing, she met with Mary Beth Merola, RN, BS, CBCN, a nurse navigator at Lankenau Medical Center, part of Main Line Health.

“Mary Beth sat me down and said they were unsure whether the mass was cancerous. They were speeding up my appointment with the breast surgeon,” Colletti recalls.

The breast surgeon, Jennifer Sabol, MD, also the director of the Comprehensive Breast Center at Lankenau, performed a biopsy. Colletti soon learned she had breast cancer.

Exploring every option

Colletti’s journey highlights the importance of having a multidisciplinary breast cancer care team that tailors treatment to each individual. In the weeks ahead, as testing gave her doctors more information, new challenges—and new options—emerged. Colletti’s Main Line Health medical team, consisting of Dr. Sabol along with oncologist Zonera Ali, MD, and plastic surgeon R. Brannon Claytor, MD, worked collaboratively to explore every possibility.

“Breast cancer’s actually a hundred different diseases all under the same name. Each needs to be treated differently, based on each person’s unique disease process,” Dr. Sabol says. “Patients need physicians who see the big picture, who take the time to get to know them and understand which treatment will provide the best outcome—because it can be overwhelming. Patients may not be thinking about how today’s decisions might affect them in the future.”

A creative surgical solution

A physical exam and ultrasound suggested Colletti’s tumor was large, which meant she would probably need a mastectomy. When an MRI showed the tumor was actually much smaller, there was hope she might instead be a candidate for breast-conserving surgery, called a lumpectomy.

Then the picture changed again.

Genetic testing showed that Colletti had a mutation in the BRCA1 gene, raising her risk for developing a second primary breast cancer. At that point, Dr. Sabol recognized that a prophylactic bilateral mastectomy was the smartest long-term approach.

“The bilateral mastectomy was important,” Dr. Sabol says, “but Anastasia was hoping to minimize her scarring and preserve as much of her natural self as possible. Preserving her nipples was very symbolic to her.”

It would also be a challenge. A large-breasted woman, Colletti was not a good candidate for a nipple-sparing mastectomy. “The breast implants that would have been required during reconstruction would have been too large,” adds Dr. Claytor, the plastic surgeon. “It wouldn’t have been possible to correctly position the nipples and ensure an adequate blood supply.”

Together, Drs. Claytor and Sabol came up with a creative solution: To enable her to preserve her nipples, they would perform Colletti’s surgery in stages. The first stage took place in November 2018. Dr. Sabol removed the breast tumor with a lumpectomy, and Dr. Claytor performed a reduction in both of Colletti’s breasts, shaping them and placing the nipples in their proper position. The next stages of surgery would involve the nipple-sparing mastectomy and breast reconstruction, now with smaller implants.

“Breast reconstruction has dramatically evolved over the past 15 years,” Dr. Claytor explains. “We’ve increased our understanding of how tissue can be moved to help maintain the most essential part of the breast, the nipple. By reconciling the patient’s goals with the limitations we have, based on the disease, we can custom-design a surgical plan.”

From left to right: R. Brannon Claytor, MD; Zonera Ali, MD; Anastasia Colletti; and Jennifer Sabol, MD, reunite for a picture in the Comprehensive Breast Center at Lankenau Medical Center.

