



Commissioner's

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Comments

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Courage in the face of adversity

October is a special month. There are lots of things that happen in October – Safe Schools Week; Down Syndrome Awareness Month, Learning Disabilities (LD) Month and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Month; the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) opens; college football really takes off, and of course, Halloween.

I realize that this is an education blog, but I am going to go a slightly different direction this week. That's the thing about a blog, it allows you to share messages important to the blogger, and this week is no exception. I suppose my topic does fit the education realm to some extent, as health education is an important part of each child's education.

October is a special month for me because it is also Breast Cancer Awareness Month. I hope everyone knows this since there has been plenty of pink around, even NFL referees and players have been wearing pink accessories. Breast Cancer Awareness Month is special to me for very personal reasons. It became important for the first time around 2006. My dear mother-in-law had her first bout with breast cancer that year. It was a tough time. We had just lost my father-in-law to esophageal cancer the previous year. My family, my wife in particular, had more placed on her than any person should. It was hard and grueling. It was sad and draining. But, as hard as it was, as I look back I realize there was good that came of it.

My mother-in-law showed a courage in facing her battle that was more than admirable, it was inspiring. I knew virtually nothing about breast cancer – only that it was treatable if caught early enough. Unfortunately, she had a very aggressive type that returned too soon after she beat it the first time. Through it all, she and my wife faced the challenges head on. She fought and held it off for a long time. She was focused on being with her grandchildren, and focused on doing what she could to help us. She was funny. She was proud. She was loving. She was a great lady.

My wife is the most incredible person I know. After watching her and her mom deal with this horrible disease, I can see why. She came by it honestly. As hard as it was, our family was given the example of strength and courage and reminded of how important life is.

This month is also important to me because a valued member of my staff fought and beat the disease. She found out she had breast cancer on the day of my first interview to become commissioner. She has become a dear friend and I am not sure the agency could run effectively without her. But knowing what I know about fighting breast cancer, it is easy to see why she is so cherished by me and our state education agency – she possesses the same courage my mother-in-law did. I am honored not only to know her, but also to have been Wilma Cannon's son-in-law.

I realize this may seem a pretty sad blog. That is not my intent. I simply want to add my own words to the month that is dedicated to awareness of this terrible disease. In most cases, it is treatable if caught early. So I encourage everyone – women and men alike (yes, though extremely rare, men do get breast cancer too) – to be diligent in their own self-examinations and for women, regular screenings. I also want to encourage you to be inspired by these strong and courageous individuals. They are all around us – in our classrooms, in our board rooms and in our communities. They teach us how to live, they teach us what it means to value the important things in life.

Take time this month to be informed and renew your commitment to taking care of yourself. In honor of these and other brave women, I will wear pink each day I can this month, I hope you will too.