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Transforming Fear Into Strength: A Breast Cancer Survivor's Journey

By Sharon Napolitano

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Bridgeport resident Vilma Castro-Melendez was referred to the Hispanic Breast Cancer Program at Smilow Cancer Hospital at Trumbull after learning she had breast cancer. She had worried that she had waited too long, but meeting with Director Monica Valero, MD, a surgical oncologist, helped put her mind at ease.

When Vilma Castro-Melendez learned she had breast cancer, she was only 46 years old. It was a complete shock as she had a mammogram two years earlier and had been reassured by a former provider that the small lump she felt was nothing to worry about.

Her referral to the Hispanic Breast Cancer Program at Smilow Cancer Hospital's Trumbull location helped her get the support and treatment she needed.

"When I found out that I had breast cancer, I was very scared," said Castro-Melendez, a mother of four whose first language is Spanish. "It was very scary because I started thinking, 'Has this been here for a long time?' 'Should I have sought a second opinion?' I had a very big tumor, and I was very concerned. I was worried that I had waited too long and would not have enough time to have the surgery and the treatment I needed."

In the beginning, Castro-Melendez said the tumor in her left breast was small, but hard. "It didn't hurt, but I asked my former provider about it, and without any additional imaging, I was reassured everything was all right," she recalled. "Then one year later, I felt like it was growing. The next year, I decided to seek medical attention again because it had gotten bigger."

About 1 in 8 women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime, according to the American Cancer Society (ACS). It is the most common cancer in women in the United States, aside from skin cancers, and primarily affects middle-aged and older women, half of whom are 62 or younger at the time of diagnosis.

Connecting patients to the Hispanic Breast Cancer Program

When Castro-Melendez was next seen by her primary care physician, she was referred for an ultrasound at the Hispanic Breast Cancer Program at the Norma Pfriem Breast Center, part of Smilow Cancer Hospital at Trumbull, where she received the clarity and culturally sensitive care she needed.

Related: [Hispanic Breast Cancer Program offers culturally sensitive care](#)

After a biopsy confirmed a cancer diagnosis, she met with surgical oncologist [Monica Valero, MD](#), director of the Hispanic Breast Cancer Program and assistant professor of Surgery at Yale School of Medicine (YSM), to discuss next steps.

"Dr. Valero is the one who checked my breast and measured it," Castro-Melendez said. "It was 10 cm at the time, and she told me she couldn't perform surgery because it was too large; I would need to undergo chemotherapy for a few months first to shrink the tumor before it could be removed."



Castro-Melendez completed chemotherapy treatment and was scheduled for surgery. Her surgery was then followed by 20 days of radiation therapy.

Today, Castro-Melendez is doing fine and is awaiting reconstructive surgery. While she waits, she is spreading the word to other women about the importance of getting their annual mammograms. "I recommend finding a doctor and keeping up with regular checkups – on time."

She also highly recommends the Hispanic Breast Cancer Program. "This program has been helpful to me," she said.

Learn more about [breast cancer services at Bridgeport Hospital](#) and [Smilow Cancer Hospital at Trumbull](#).

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