

Patient advocates sun safety

Melanoma

continued from D1

time – and, perhaps, still unknown to many Colorado residents – is that the state has one of the highest per-capita rates for cases of melanoma in the U.S. The likely reason: its elevation.)

Beset by pre-adolescent acne, Race, from the age of 10, regularly saw a dermatologist.

She discovered that, the more time she spent in the sun, “the fewer pimples I’d have.” She also intentionally parted her hair so that it would cover a mole on the crown of her head. “My dermatologist never knew I had the mole,” she notes.

In addition to desiring the cosmetic benefits of a tan, Race also enjoyed “the relaxing feeling of just lying in the sun with my eyes closed.”

The mother of Race’s lifelong best friend, Cherie Pryor, owned a small tanning salon. The girls would supplement their time spent in the natural sun with time in the tanning beds.

In high school, Race and Pryor were stand-outs on the volleyball team. Race recalls that all her teammates also were tanning-bed enthusiasts, and that the entire squad “would compete to see who could get the darkest shade.”

“I always won,” she adds with a rueful laugh.

Mole began to change

After high school, Race attended college for a few years, but decided it wasn’t for her. She returned home to Colorado Springs, where her parents had moved. She also vaguely recalls that, either during college or right after, her scalp mole began “bothering” her.

“It wasn’t painful, but sometimes it would itch. Other times, it would feel sore or peel. Every so often, fluid leaked out.

“But, stupid me – I didn’t think it was anything serious, so I didn’t do anything about it,” she recalls with obvious self-castigation.

The personable and attractive young woman, who had always been into hair, fashion and makeup, was too busy with her new studies to wor-

ABOUT THE RICHARD DAVID KANN MELANOMA FOUNDATION

Created in 1995 by Deborah K. Schwarzberg after her brother, Richard, died at 44 of melanoma, the organization’s mission is “to save lives through education about the prevention and early detection of skin cancer.” The foundation (which rents space inside *The Palm Beach Post* building) is focused on giving children the skills necessary to make healthful, sun-safety choices. This includes advocating for teaching sun safety in schools and lobbying to place stricter age requirements on who can visit tanning salons. To learn more, visit melanomafoundation.com or call 561-655-9655.

ry about a mole she’d had her entire life. (She had enrolled in cosmetology school, with the goal of becoming a licensed esthetician.)

It was during the period from late 2011 to early 2012 that the budding skin-care/beauty expert began coming to the scary – and ironic – realization that she might have her own epidermal disease.

“Everything the instructor said about melanoma matched what I was experiencing,” Race said.

The last straw was an incident in March 2012: “My instructor was trimming my hair and barely nipped the mole. It began bleeding and oozing badly,” she says.

Upon recounting this episode to her grandmother, back in Florence, Colo., Race heeded Grandma’s insistence that she see a doctor.

‘I’ll pray for you’

The expression on her dermatologist’s face while examining the mole told Race the situation was serious. He immediately excised the mole for biopsy. Before she left his office, Race recalls, “He said something that freaked me out: ‘I’ll pray for you. What doctor says that?’”

A week later, everyone’s worst fears were confirmed: The mole was malignant – a Stage 4 (of a possible 5) melanoma on the Clark Scale (which measures how deeply the cancer has penetrated the skin).

Race was immediately referred to a head-and-neck surgeon for a “wide scalp excision.” On May 8, 2012, she underwent scalp surgery to remove underlying cancer cells. She also had a “sentinel node biopsy” to test for further spread.

Though the surgeon was confident that the cancer hadn’t metastasized (“He said it was,

at most, a 20 percent chance,” Race says), he was wrong.

The devastating reality: “A month later, I was back under the knife for a complete neck dissection to remove all remaining lymph nodes,” Race says.

The combination of the tumor’s size/penetration, node involvement and metastasis meant, Race explains, that “I was now officially a Stage III-melanoma patient.”

This meant she’d need to undergo an extremely aggressive form of in-patient “bio-chemotherapy” at the University of Colorado Hospital in Aurora.

Starting in June, and lasting through the summer, she’d spend Monday through Friday hooked up to a 24-hour drip consisting of three types of chemo drugs and two types of other powerful medications.

After each five-day stint, she’d travel back home to Colorado Springs, do her best to recuperate for two weeks, then repeat the cycle.

Throughout the ordeal, Race continued with her plans – she passed her practical, as well as her written, state cosmetology exams, so she’s now a licensed esthetician.

“As soon as I’m back at full strength, I’m going to pursue my career,” she promises.

In the meantime, while she admits that “physically, I’m still pretty weak,” she insists that “my attitude and outlook have never been so strong.”

And while Race will have to be checked periodically for the rest of her life, she credits the love and support of “my parents, family and friends for giving me the strength to battle through.”

And starting with her visit to Palm Beach next week, Race plans to become an active, visible, nationwide advocate for melanoma awareness and prevention.