

Surviving the trauma of cancer

Like most people, Francesca Pagnin remembers where she was when John F. Kennedy was shot and when Princess Diana died. She has another defining moment in her life — when she was told she had breast cancer.

"It was March 10, 1994, at 5:15 p.m.," the Venetian-born woman recalls. "I was with my family in the kitchen. We'd had an early supper and my husband, Roberto, and the children were doing dishes. The phone rang. It was my doctor. When she told me I had cancer, my legs caved in. I said: 'Are you sure?' She said: 'Yes, there's no doubt. There's a tumour and it has to come out immediately.'"

At that moment, Francesca Pagnin's life was changed forever. "My first instinct was to protect my children who were 13 and 15 at the time," she says. "I was 44. I'd never been sick in my life. I'd never even had my appendix out."

Pagnin is typical of 80 per cent of women diagnosed with breast cancer who have no known risk factors. She had found a pea-sized nodule in her left breast some time before, but had ignored it. "I had no time," she recalls. "I was the primary caregiver for both my mother and my father who were ill at the time."

But when she noticed the nodule getting bigger, she went for a mammogram. The telephone call was informing her the test had come back positive.

"My husband, Roberto, didn't believe it. He said: 'It can't be. They've mixed up your mammogram with some other woman's.' It wasn't until the doctor came out after surgery and confirmed it was cancer that he accepted it."

The surgery Francesca had one week after being diagnosed was a lumpectomy. She came through it confidently, buoyed by a strong and positive frame of mind.

"Psychologically, I was doing fine," she recalls. "The doctors were optimistic, given my age and the small size of the tumour. I told everybody that I believed in the power of the mind and that I was going to heal myself. Then the nurse pronounced my doomsday sentence: 'When it's gone to the nodes,' she said, 'it's gone to the nodes ...'"

"I was thrown into a tailspin. My doctor confirmed that the cancer had gone into three out of nine lymph nodes. I thought: 'My God ... I might lose my life to this? How can this be? I don't smoke ... I don't drink.'"

A month later, Francesca began the first of 12 chemotherapy treatments. After the first treatment, she was violently ill. "I came home, got a box of Christies Crackers (Thank God for Mr. Christie) and went upstairs. I ate a package of crackers, washed my face, put on my headband and said: 'Damn it, this is not going to get the best of me. Then I went down and had supper with my family and never had a problem with the chemo again.'"

But Pagnin wasn't content simply to endure. A former teacher, she set to work on a proposal she called *Fighting Back Through Education* which she presented to the two boards of education and various organizations, offering to speak about having cancer. "My first place to speak was Sion School," she says. "That was the real beginning of my recovery."

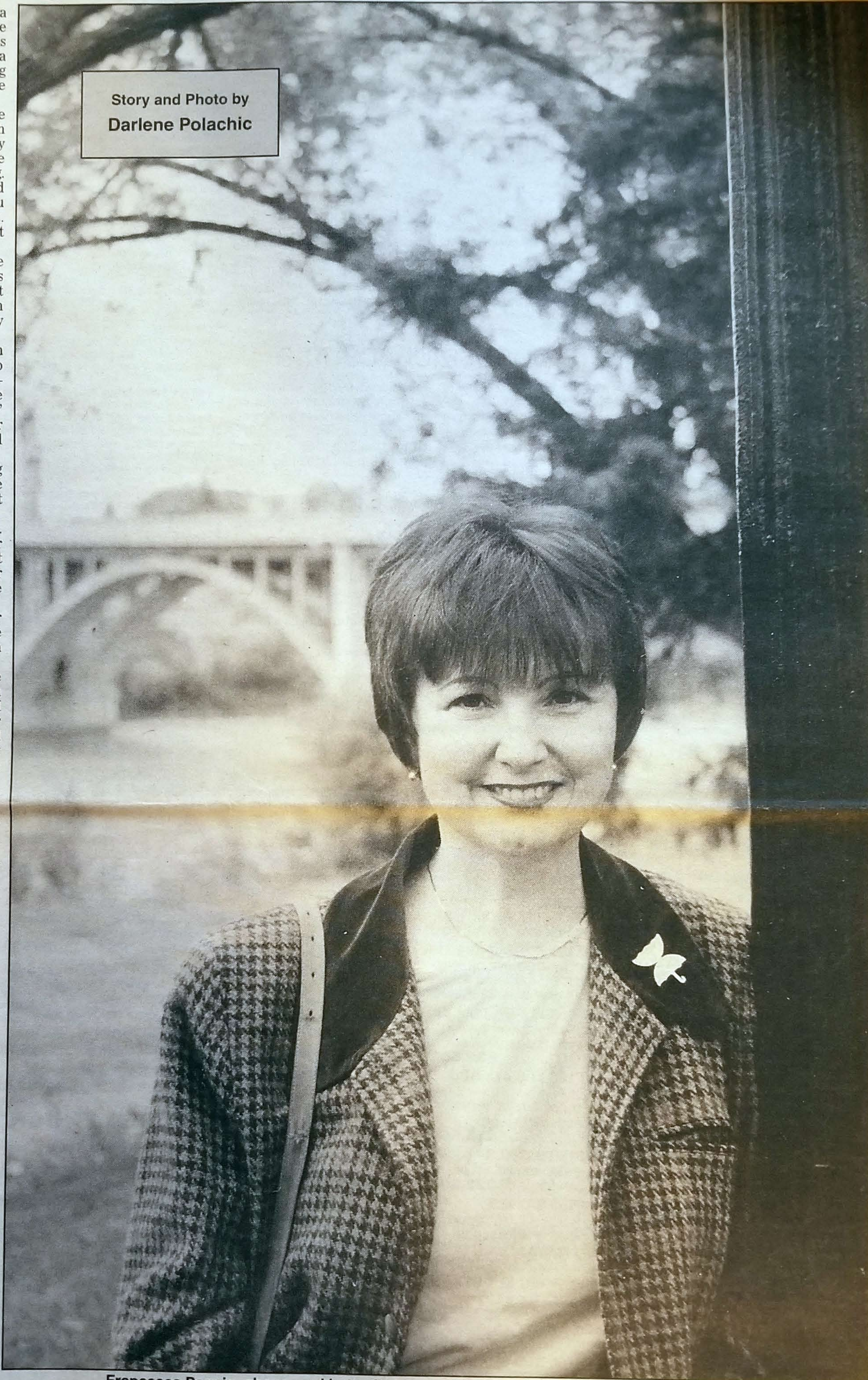
Soon after, Francesca joined a support group for women with breast cancer. The survivor led/survivor driven Hope Saskatoon Cancer Support Group for Women has a membership of several dozen who come "as they feel the need." It meets at Zion Lutheran church the second and fourth Thursdays of each month. The group conducts annual weekend retreats; is involved in outreach efforts to the newly diagnosed; offers mutual help among participants; and provides public, professional, and individual education. It also has a lending library of books, videos and tapes on various aspects of cancer and recovery.

Pagnin says last year was a turning point for the group. "We decided we wanted to take an active role in the fight against breast cancer, and started plans for a Hope Breast Cancer Race For Recovery fund-raiser."

Francesca's neighbour, wildlife artist Gail Adams designed a logo for the campaign — a butterfly whose wings form an umbrella. The butterfly symbolizes the metamorphosis women go through upon being diagnosed with cancer; the umbrella signifies renewed spirit and hope.

Pagnin, who is director and chair of the upcoming walk/run/jog event to be held Oct. 4, says it is open to people of all ages, and not just cancer survivors. "This is an opportunity for everyone to come together over this life and death medical issue," she says. A designated amount of the money raised

Story and Photo by
Darlene Polachic



Francesca Pagnin, above, and butterfly logo, right



will go to the Saskatchewan Cancer Centre for research. Breast cancer is the leading cause of death for women between the ages of 35 and 55. Every day, 47 women in Canada are diagnosed with breast cancer. Every day 15 women die from it.

The Saskatoon Credit Union, the title sponsor for the race, has donated \$10,000. The event also has the support of both boards of education and 100 Saskatoon churches. Francesca terms the support of Saskatoon's business community: "so outstanding, so humbling ..."

Out-of-town participants in the race are especially welcome. Though pre-registration is encouraged, on-site registration is

also possible. There will be special prizes for out-of-town participants.

The Hope Breast Cancer Race for Recovery takes place Sunday, Oct. 4 at 10 a.m. from the Vimy Memorial (the band shell beside the Delta Bessborough). Anyone interested in participating or volunteering may contact the Saskatoon Credit Union at 934-4000.

How has being a breast cancer survivor affected Francesca Pagnin's life? "It's given me a completely new perspective," the vibrant young woman declares. "I always end my talks with my favourite quote from the Bible: 'I have come so you could live life to the full.' God's gift to us is our life. How we live our life is our gift back to God."