

# Senator says breast cancer doesn't slow her

**SCHIMEK** from page 1

session with the knowledge that she has breast cancer.

Schimek was diagnosed on Dec. 10, 1997. So when the Legislature reconvened January 7, she once again took on all the demands and stress of serving in the Unicameral, but this time with added worries.

But breast cancer doesn't appear to have slowed Schimek, who didn't miss one day of the 60-day session. If anything, she said, it has helped her prioritize her life.

"I've learned to take things a bit more in stride and not get as involved in some of the more mundane things in life," she said.

Schimek underwent six weeks of radiation treatment and had her lymph nodes removed from under her left arm. Although she said she has cut back somewhat on legislative lun-

cheons and dinners to conserve energy, she has not felt weakened by the cancer.

Breast cancer may have curtailed a run for the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor, however. Although she was not sure she would have run, breast cancer and the necessary treatment ruled out a candidacy, she said.

She is now taking tamoxifen, an anti-estrogen drug that has shown some promise in preventing recurrences of the disease.

Schimek said her current prognosis is good. She will return in early June for her next checkup, but all signs indicate the cancer has been removed for the time being, she said.

She learned of her breast cancer in steps. First a mammogram didn't look quite right, then other tests indicated she might have breast cancer.

When it was confirmed, it didn't

surprise her, she said.

"I was well aware of the issue and the fact that one out of every eight women in this country contracts breast cancer," she said. "It's not a disease you can hope to escape."

Long before Schimek contracted breast cancer, she had directed her policy-making efforts toward the issue.

As sponsor of LB256, Schimek helped organize the state's Every Woman Matters program. Every Woman Matters pays for medical care dealing with cancer, including office visits, mammograms, PAP smears and pelvic exams, for women 40 years and older who have low-to-moderate income and are not covered by Medicaid or HMOs.

Since 1992, when it received its first federal grants, Every Woman Matters has provided services for nearly 30,000 Nebraska women — up from 10,000 three years ago.

Debra Tomlinson Hoffman, program administrator for Every Woman Matters, said Schimek's efforts in initiating and publicizing the program have been essential.

"She has continued to be a champion of the program every step of the way," she said.

In 1995, Schimek sponsored LB68, which requires insurance companies to cover mammograms.

Schimek also has been involved with other health issues, including a bill that would require insurance companies to pay for costs associated with diabetes. The bill was advanced by the Health and Human Services Committee this year but was not passed.

"I think she's been remarkable," said outgoing Sen. Don Wesely of Lincoln, with whom Schimek served on the Health and Human Services Committee for a time. "The real irony is that she's been the leader in the Legislature to get mammograms covered for women."

Schimek credits her transition to a life with breast cancer to the network of support she receives from family, friends and colleagues.

Her husband, Herbert, was diagnosed with cancer in his lymph system eight years ago. Schimek said this experience allowed her to learn about cancer and ways of dealing with it.

Schimek said she has come in contact with other public figures who suffer from breast cancer, including former Sen. Connie Day of Norfolk.

Day had been diagnosed with breast cancer before her 1992 election to the Legislature. When the cancer spread to a tumor in her tailbone in 1995, she was forced to resign.

While in the Legislature, Day

served on the Health and Human Services Committee with Schimek and worked for passage of the bill requiring insurance coverage for breast cancer treatment.

Day agreed that support from a network of cancer patients is helpful, especially when it allows newly diagnosed patients to meet cancer survivors.

"When people hear of breast cancer, the first thing they think is that it's a death sentence," she said. "That's not the case."

Schimek said her experience with breast cancer has provided "a renewal, a chance to look at life again and see if I'm doing what I really want to be doing."

Apparently Schimek likes what she is doing. She indicated she is likely to seek a fourth term representing the 27th District in 2000.

"If I were a betting person, I would bet on it," she said.

Schimek has remained positive since her diagnosis. Her desire for a better quality of life in Nebraska hasn't changed, she said, just her outlook on the important things in life.

"I still want to have an office that helps people find solutions to their problems," she said. "What isn't the same is my willingness to get upset when things don't fall together as they should."

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