

# Cancer Comes in Colors Other Than Pink

By [Leslie Linthicum / Of the Journal](#) on Sun, Oct 30, 2011

When you know someone who has cancer, email punctuation is not an inconsiderable issue.

If you get an email with “CT Scan Results” as the subject line, you dread clicking it open. It’s quite different when you get one that reads “CT Scan Results!!!”

My emails from Annette Leger – native of Las Vegas, registered dietician, bicyclist, maker of killer mole sauce and Stage 4 cancer patient – have tended to have a good dose of exclamation points.

It’s partly because the various treatments she has gotten to extend her life have, until quite recently, been working reasonably well. But it’s mostly because Annette is generally an exclamation-point kind of person.

I’m introducing you to Annette here because everyone would benefit from knowing her and because we’re just ending the pinkest month on the calendar – October, breast cancer awareness month.

The disease of breast cancer is a remarkable public relations story. It got assigned a color – pink – and mostly through the Susan G. Komen Foundation it became the focus of fundraising walks and merchandising campaigns that have pushed breast cancer to the forefront of cancer discussions. Firefighters, NFL players, rodeo cowboys and office workers don pink to show their support of research and to raise awareness of the disease. Major corporations have signed on in support.

That has translated into phenomenal amounts of research money and women doing a better job of screening themselves. It all adds up to better outcomes and fewer lives lost.

But Annette doesn’t have breast cancer; she has lung cancer.

When you have a less-famous cancer, October can seem like a long, pink month. It’s not that Annette is envious of the attention paid to breast cancer, but October reminds her of what might happen if only lung cancer could get the same attention.

“Breast cancer deaths have gone down dramatically because of increased awareness,” Annette told me. “I’m thrilled. I wouldn’t take anything away from that, but lung cancer can also follow in those footsteps.”

You probably didn’t know that lung cancer has a color and a month, too. The color is pearl (white) and the National Lung Cancer Partnership pumps up the profile of its disease in November, Lung Cancer Awareness Month, by asking people to wear pearls.

You also probably didn't know, unless you know someone who has received a lung cancer diagnosis, that lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths for both men and women, and it kills more people than breast, prostate and colon cancers combined.

Or that, according to the National Lung Cancer Partnership, nearly 1,000 people in New Mexico get a lung cancer diagnosis every year, and 800 people die of it.

Annette's oncologist, Dr. Julie Bauman of the UNM Cancer Center, points out that lung cancer doesn't benefit from the legions of living ambassadors that breast cancer has. "Lung cancer," she says, "has a very low survival rate."

I asked Annette recently why she thought lung cancer got left out of the cancer story.

"Smoking," she said immediately. "The stigma of smoking."

The perception is that if you get lung cancer, you brought it on yourself?

"Yes," she said, "even though if everyone stopped smoking, there would still be lung cancer."

Annette has never smoked a cigarette, and she didn't grow up in a house where anyone smoked. Yet, after consulting doctors for a full year to investigate why she found herself suddenly coughing and wheezing, lung cancer was diagnosed.

Ten to 15 percent of the people who get lung cancer never smoked, which is another statistic most of us don't come across until we know a nonsmoker who has lung cancer.

And lung cancer in nonsmokers is often diagnosed at a late stage. By the time everyone had figured out that Annette probably didn't have allergies or asthma and a doctor ordered up a chest X-ray, a year had passed and the picture of her lung showed a huge tumor, nearly 8-by-8 centimeters square. Annette got her diagnosis in June 2010.

When the doctor shows you that picture, you quickly learn your time is limited and you have only a few treatment options, all designed only to extend your life and improve the months you have left.

Knowing their time is limited sparks in many people a need to warn others about the disease they've contracted or to raise money for research – research that almost surely won't benefit them but might help others.

Annette has thrown herself into the lung cancer world with her characteristic vigor and has become evangelical about spreading the word that, even if you feel great, never smoked and can ride your bike for 25 miles a day, you can still have a tumor growing inside your lung.

Annette wished she had gotten an X-ray a year earlier, when her wheezing started.

“You can insist,” she says now. “You can go back in two weeks and say, ‘I want a chest X-ray.’ I didn’t insist.”

The map of fundraising events across the nation on the [freetobreathe.org](http://freetobreathe.org) website now has a red dot in the middle of New Mexico, which represents a rally and bike ride in the bosque that Annette is spearheading next spring.

Despite the reduced capacity in her lungs and discomforting effects of some therapy, Annette continues to find joy in riding her bike through her treatments and is hoping a lot of others do the same on theirs during the fundraiser March 25.

“I just try and enjoy every moment every day,” Annette told me. “Because I could feel really bad about it, but then I would waste what little time I have feeling bad.”

UpFront is a daily front-page news and opinion column. Comment directly to Leslie at 823-3914 or [llinthicum@abqjournal.com](mailto:llinthicum@abqjournal.com). Go to [www.abqjournal.com/letters/new](http://www.abqjournal.com/letters/new) to submit a letter to the editor.

— This article appeared on page A1 of the Albuquerque Journal