The realization was “earth shattering,” and suddenly she couldn’t see straight. A colorful thermographic image confirmed her fears — which she intuitively sensed already — Jamie Roncone of Westhampton had metastatic breast cancer.

Shortly before Halloween in 2016, Roncone underwent a double mastectomy surgery with reconstruction. For a while, she thought she was in the clear. But then last December someone called from the hospital a few days after Christmas with bad news.

Her cancer wasn’t gone. It had metastasized in her hip bone.

“I’m 46. I have young children, this is when I’m supposed to be thriving,” Roncone said. “That all gets sidelined when you’re dealing with cancer. And it’s not just the treatment. The medications I’m on cause side effects — cognitive abilities, fatigue. You’re dealing with that every day.”

Roncone, a mother of two and owner of Healing Tree Health and Wellness Center in Easthampton, threw herself into treatment plans, both conventional and “unconventional” — oral chemotherapy, and one drug for osteoporosis and another to shut down her ovaries, coupled with acupuncture and infrared sauna and hypobaric chamber therapy for oxygen treatment.

And then there was “a whole slew of supplementation and herbs,” said Roncone.

The treatment seemed to work. “In under five months I received news of being in remission,” she continued.

Now almost a year since her second diagnosis, doctors say she’ll have to be on medication for the next five years at least. Her cancer journey has been an incredible challenge, she says, mentally and physically. Through it, she’s learned the importance of caring for the whole person.

Both Roncone’s mother and aunt had breast cancer. Her mother has been cancer-free for 17 years, but her aunt didn’t survive, and passed away right before her 50th birthday.

“I was very close to my aunt. That impacted me greatly. I wanted to be able to save her and I wasn’t able to,” Roncone said.

Around that same time, because of her family’s history with breast cancer, doctors recommended that Roncone begin getting regular mammograms in her mid-30s. According to Dr. Alena Kreychman, a radiologist at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, breast cancer is one of the leading causes of death in women between the ages of 35 and 60. She recommended that women should begin getting yearly mammograms at around 40 years old as a preventative measure.

After one of her mammograms, Roncone received a letter in the mail saying doctors thought they saw something that looked like cancer. Still emotionally raw from watching her mother and aunt battle breast cancer, Roncone says she was terrified going into the appointment.

The radiologist never found anything, and Roncone went home shaken.

“They keep on switching positions and squeezing the life out of me, and every one of those pictures is radiation. They weren’t finding anything,” Roncone said. “For me, I feel like there’s a lot of false positives in mammography. I felt like I was over scanned to look for something that wasn’t there.”
In order to monitor her breast health more closely in-between her yearly mammograms, Roncone decided to try thermography, a screening method that uses images taken by an infrared camera to monitor the body’s blood flow and heat patterns.

“I wanted another way to monitor changes in my breasts. Mammography was painful, and after I had that scan, they didn’t find anything and I was getting another round of being hit by radiation,” Roncone said.

Thermography was first used in the 1960s, and was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the 1980s as an “adjunctive tool” alongside a primary test like a mammogram, according to the agency’s website. However, the FDA cautions “thermography has not been shown to be effective as a standalone test for either breast cancer screening or diagnosis in detecting early stage breast cancer.”

But for those who aren't eligible for mammograms either for medical reasons or age, Dale Thomas, a certified clinical thermographer at Healthy Body Thermography in Florence and Easthampton, suggested thermography could be a good way to proactively monitor for breast cancer in addition to methods like breast ultrasounds. And for others like Roncone who are already receiving regular mammograms, it could be a good in-between option to keep a closer eye on their breast health, she says.

“Most women in their 20s, their 30s, etc, think that getting a breast scan is something for old ladies, when they get to your 50s,” Thomas said. “The problem is, by then, you might have a mass. The beauty of thermography is that if you start early, and you're monitoring all along, you'll get ahead of that. You'll develop the mindset that you can have intervention, and prevention.”

About six months before she was due for her next mammogram and shortly after her first thermography screening, Roncone says she became suspicious that she might have cancer and went in for a followup thermography visit. The image revealed a mass that looked cancerous, and she quickly went in for a followup mammogram, which confirmed the findings.

A month later she underwent surgery.

“For me, (thermography) was lifesaving,” Roncone said. “The follow-through and seeing it — not even in black and white, it was in beautiful color — prompted me to go further and get diagnosed. It was the first step in identifying something that I was feeling in my body.”

Roncone says her experience with thermography was positive, and not just because it prompted her to seek treatment. Thomas provided a comforting and safe space, which didn't feel like a sterile medical office, for her to process what she was going through, she continues.

The physical setbacks she's endured over the past few years battling cancer are only part of the challenges that Roncone faces every day. She recalls waking up after her three month post-surgery check up and realizing that everything had changed.

“The surgeon, after my initial breast cancer (checkup), told me ‘you're fine, you can get back to normal,’ and she was speaking in terms of getting back to work — it was safe for me to use my arms and hands again,” said Roncone. “Those words hit me so hard, ‘get back to normal.’ I couldn't get out of bed the next morning, and when my husband asked me what was wrong, I said, ‘I don't know what normal is.’”

Her perspective on life has changed drastically, and she's been forced to learn to accept help from others.

“It put me into slow motion enough to realize what’s really important: My children. My husband. Myself,” Roncone said. “I start off into space a lot more in a mindful way. And what I mean by that, is I slow things down. It sounds cliche. I'm living in the moment.”

She became a certified life coach, and has made it her mission to make sure that no woman has to go through cancer or another difficulty feeling like they’re alone.

Most of all, she's learned to choose the things that matter.

“Where I used to be so busy, now I make a choice to say ‘you know what? That stuff isn't as important. I'm going to sit and read a book with my daughter, or have a conversation with my son. And it's OK if the stuff around the house doesn't get done,” Roncone said.

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For those who haven't had a thermography scan before, first screenings are $195 at Healthy Body Thermography. Subsequent image screenings are between $125 and $150. For more information call 888-617-7262, ext. 1, or visit healthybodythermography.com.

Read this article on the Gazette’s website at: https://www.gazettenet.com/Thermography-20848420