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They know the true power of positive thinking

BYLINE: CAROLYN THORNTON, Journal Sports Writer

Melissa Janikies and Diane Kelly refuse to dwell on their health woes and look to make a statement in the Wild Dog Triathlon today at Colt State Park in Bristol.

"Attitude is everything."

That's the way Melissa Janikies sees it.

When faced with an obstacle, she says, "deal with it and move on," which is exactly what the Cranston woman did when she discovered a cancerous lump under her arm while taking a shower one day in March of last year.

"You have a choice," said the former Bryant softball standout. "You can be a victim or you can be a survivor. I have a good life, and I choose to keep living it."

Diane Kelly agrees.

"One of my favorite sayings is that, 'Wisdom is avoiding all thoughts that weaken you,' " she says, quoting motivational speaker Wayne Dyer.

That was no small task when Kelly developed a brain tumor three years ago.

"It's a lot of work to stay in the moment and to stay positive," she said. "But I knew because of my strong faith that everything would work out well, regardless of what my fate was to be."

Janikies and Kelly, who met and learned of each others' recent struggles while training at their local gym last fall, will celebrate all that each has overcome when they tackle today's Wild Dog Triathlon at Colt State Park in Bristol.

"It's going to be a very emotional day," said Kelly, 48, who still amazes herself each time she finishes one of her swimming, cycling or running workouts. She can't help but think back to just three summers ago when none of this would have been possible.

Just when everything was going "tremendously well" personally, professionally and athletically, Kelly's life came grinding to a halt in March 2004 when she developed an excruciating headache that lasted for more than two months with no reprieve.

"I felt like I'd been hit by a truck," said Kelly, whose eyesight and hearing both began to diminish. "Morning, noon and night - I'd go to bed with it and wake up with it. I was like a zombie. I couldn't go to work. I couldn't go to the gym."

After going from doctor to doctor frantically searching for an answer, Kelly learned on the Friday before Memorial Day that there was a large brain tumor on the left side of her head.

A few days later, Dr. Arthur Day, a neurosurgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, removed the tumor.

Although the surgery was a success and the tumor turned out to be benign, Kelly's journey was far from over, as her body began recovering from the trauma caused by the large mass.

The former R.I. bodybuilding champion lost weight, as well as nearly all of her strength. She continued to have some hearing issues, and she could only partially open her jaw until the muscles and nerves healed.

Two months after the surgery, her epilepsy, which had been dormant for about two years, was reactivated by one of the medications she was taking, and she spent a weekend battling one seizure after another.

"I had a phenomenal neurosurgeon, and he did a great job," said Kelly, "but any time you cut into someone's head, you've got to go through muscles and tendons. It's a very intricate surgery, and the risk factor was very high because of where it was. So I had a lot of complications from that."

And that would not be the last obstacle Kelly would have to overcome. In March 2006, when she was getting back on her feet physically, she was let go from her job of 21 years.

A few months after that, she found herself back in the hospital undergoing emergency surgery for a ruptured cyst in her stomach.

As she did with the brain tumor, however, Kelly took each of those setbacks in stride. She has begun a new job working as a national relationship manager for RBS Lynk.

The newly appointed president of the Ocean State Women's Golf Association, Kelly has gotten her golf game back on track, recently winning the Presidents Cup at West Warwick Country Club.

And, thanks to the suggestion of longtime friend and avid runner Brenda Rodrigues, Kelly has taken up a new sport, discovering that the natural endorphin release that takes place in her brain while she is running helps her battle the painful headaches that she still contends with.

"My glass is always half full," said Kelly, who credits the support of Rodrigues, a strong faith and her positive outlook on life for getting her through every ordeal. "I can take the worst adversity that I have had and look at it and say that it's been for a reason. Out of this whole adversity, I have a deeper appreciation for myself and being able to push myself to the next level. I still have some side effects, but all in all, I feel really, really good."

Indeed, Janikies says that is the message that she and Kelly hope to convey to others when they both cross the finish line this morning - that one can get through even the most difficult of circumstances with the right attitude.

Janikies - vice president of operations for the family-owned Jan Companies - says that something in her gut told her that the lump she discovered under her arm last year was cancerous. She acted immediately and when the diagnosis was confirmed, insisted on the most aggressive form of treatment, undergoing a mastectomy in May 2006.

Last month, she finished up a yearlong course of treatment at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston that included radiation therapy, a new form of chemotherapy and, because she agreed to take part in a clinical trial, antibody injections every three weeks.

Today, Janikies, 45, considers herself to be cancer free.

There were some low points, she says, such as losing her hair. But she even took control of that situation by shaving her head before the hair fell out from the treatments. As for losing one of her breasts, Janikies said, "it's a body part," adding that she always just considered it to be "ornamentation" anyway and joking that her prosthetic might just help serve as a flotation device when she sets out on today's quarter-mile swim.

"The key is I found (the lump) and I reacted to it," Janikies said of her battle with cancer. "I think people consider it devastating news. I just can't see it that way. I was always taught to have a positive attitude or when it is (bad news), we'll get through it."

And while training for her first triathlon has been challenging, Janikies says she's confident she will get through this task, as well.

"Diane's a very inspirational and very supportive person, and I couldn't have asked for a better training partner," she said. "The training process hasn't been easy, but certainly I know I can do it."