



Multnomah County Board encourages people to take cancer-preventing steps

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The Multnomah County Board of County Commissioners on Thursday proclaimed Thursday, April 5 as Cancer Awareness Prevention Day.

The unanimous vote came after several people testified to the personal toll cancer had taken in their lives and families.

Nearly 21,400 Oregonians are diagnosed with cancer each year and 7,790 die from cancer, the American Cancer Society reports. At least half of all new cases could be detected earlier through screening or prevented altogether by avoiding tobacco and alcohol abuse, getting proper nutrition and certain vaccinations.

The April 5 proclamation was sponsored by Commissioners [Deborah Kafoury](#) and [Loretta Smith](#). Commissioner Smith said she lost both her father and grandfather to cancer.

LaRisha Baker, a program supervisor in the [Health Department](#), said she and her sisters Marsha, Michelle and Andrea Baker founded the nonprofit [Steve Baker Colorectal Cancer Alliance](#) in Portland after their dad died in 2008.

The Baker family had celebrated July 4, 2007 together when Steve Baker first felt ill. Within days, doctors discovered a large tumor in his intestine and diagnosed him with late-stage colon cancer. The cancer had also spread into his liver.



The Baker sisters from left, Marsha, LaRisha, Andrea, Michelle, and their parents Steve and Christy, seated. The sisters founded the Steve Baker Colorectal Cancer Alliance after their dad died.

Steve Baker, who had almost never missed a day of work, who loved to golf and to barbecue, underwent surgery and months of intensive chemotherapy. Nevertheless, he died 10 months after he first became ill. He was 56.

LaRisha Baker said in their grief, she and her sisters went to a Washington D.C. conference on colorectal cancer to try to understand what had happened and why. By the time Steve Baker was diagnosed, she said, cancer had apparently been present in his body for 10 years. He had complained for some time of bowel trouble, but had never been referred for a colonoscopy that would have detected the disease early.

In Washington, D.C., the Baker sisters wound up connecting with an advocacy group, lobbying on Capitol Hill and coming home and forming their own nonprofit at her dining room table to educate, advocate and help prevent cancer. They continue to lobby Congress, including authorizing a postage stamp to fund research for colorectal cancer.

"I don't want my story to be someone else's story," LaRisha Baker told the board.

Now the Baker sisters speak regularly to Portland-area groups and in March, during Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, were featured at a series of free "lunch and learn" sessions at Providence Portland Medical Center. They urged attendees to get a screening colonoscopy.

"The test is not one we look forward to, but colorectal cancer has no early warning signs, so screening is essential," says Todd Crocenzi, M.D., medical director of the Providence Colorectal Cancer Program. "We are grateful to the Baker family for their courage in sharing their story with others, and their dedication to informing the public about the importance of early detection."

Commissioner [Diane McKeel](#) thanked the Baker sisters saying that her own father died of colon cancer at 51.

At the board meeting, Patricia Warren of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. testified to the importance of diet and maintaining a healthy weight in preventing cancer. The June Key Delta Community Center in North Portland has been holding healthy cooking classes to help educate people on how to cook – and eat – healthier meals.

The classes are part of the Ending Childhood Obesity project (ECO) sponsored by Bob's Red Mill and the National College of Natural Medicine to teach families in the region how to prepare whole foods to reduce chronic disease and improve nutrition.

"It's not a diet trend or food dogma. It's about creating a healthy relationship with food and taking responsibility for food we're eating and choices we make," said Dr. Julie Briley, a primary care naturopathic physician.

[Chair Jeff Cogen](#), whose father died of pancreatic cancer in February, has also lost an aunt to colon cancer. He thanked those who told their stories.

"It's not everyday you have people talking about colonoscopies," he said, "but it's a good thing."

"Talking about it is difficult and getting screening can be intimidating," Commissioner Smith said. "We need to let friends and family know it's OK to talk about cancer."



Steve Baker died of colon cancer at 56. By the time Baker was diagnosed, cancer had apparently been present in his body for 10 years. He was never referred for a colonoscopy.