Melanoma Survivor Denise Kellen's Mission: Prevention and Detection

Denise Kellen, a member of Melanoma Research Alliance's board of directors, describes her personal experience with surviving melanoma.

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Growing up – from June until August – Denise Kellen and her family practically lived at Lido Beach on Long Island's south shore. They'd swim, play on the surf, read, and sunbathe. Like clockwork she'd develop two to three severe sunburns that would leave her pale skin a fiery red before peeling away. "You have to remember that was the Coppertone era," says Denise. "I could have been that little girl. We had no idea of the long-term implications of what we were doing. In fact, we thought it was perfectly normal – and maybe even healthy.

If only Denise knew then what she knows now.

When Denise was ten-years old, she visited the dermatologist for the first time to have a mole removed from her neck. She'd repeat this trip over the years to have other concerning moles removed – but never gave much thought to it.

This blissful ignorance continued until a dermatologist she visited in her 20's gave her advice, after removing another mole, that would change Denise' life: "If I were you, I wouldn't go out in the sun, ever. Forget about suntan lotion."

"And I did," Denise jokes. "The side benefit is that my skin is in pretty good shape, but I can't undo the damage that had already been done."

She continued to see a dermatologist on a fairly regular basis. She'd have moles examined, some removed, and would then go about her day.

This continued until 1990, when now in her 40's, she was back at her dermatologist's office ready to have a mole on her leg removed. She noticed it while shaving and even though it didn't look like anything serious – in fact it didn't have any of the ABCDEs of melanoma – but it still didn't feel right.

"I'd had this 'pink thing' on my leg for decades," says Denise. "But I noticed when I moved my hand over it, that it seemed thicker."

The dermatologist insisted it was fine and even tried to talk her out of removing it.

Denise wasn't taking any chances: "hey, I'm here, I'm mentally prepared, can't you just remove it?"

A week later the dermatologist called in shock: "I'm humiliated to report that it was melanoma."

She was quickly referred to a surgeon who specialized in melanoma. This surgeon performed a second procedure called mohs surgery to ensure that no trace of the melanoma remained. This doctor assured her that she had almost zero risk that it had metastasized – or spread – throughout her body.

Despite this great news, and the tissue-sparing technique used for her surgery, Denise was still left with a massive scar that she still lives with some thirty years later.

"People talk about skin cancer and surgery like it's no big deal," says Denise. "Don't even try to tell that to someone who's actually gone through it. I feel like my leg was mangled and that's not even the worst part. The worst part is that I'm always going to be at heightened risk for developing ANOTHER melanoma."

The research backs this up. Indeed, if you immediately zero in on pale skin, red hair, and a history of sunburns when you think of melanoma risk factors, you are overlooking a serious elephant in the room. The biggest predictor of developing melanoma is having one previously.

Melanoma survivors are at a 9-fold increased risk of developing another melanoma.1 That's why sun safety habits, regular follow-up care, and full-body skin exams with a dermatologist are so important.

"The emotional repercussions are still there. I know how lucky I was that my melanoma developed in a part of my body that I was familiar with. I'm not sure what would have happened had it appeared on my back where I couldn't see it," says Denise. "I was lucky to have noticed it – but too many people aren't lucky."

Today, Denise serves as a member of MRA's Board of Directors and co-chair of MRA's Dermatology Council where she is a staunch advocate for melanoma prevention and early detection.

The Melanoma Research Alliance is the largest non-profit funder of melanoma research worldwide. MRA's funded research has helped bring 13 new FDA approved treatment options to patients. These treatments have upended what it meant to be diagnosed with advanced melanoma, but unfortunately, haven't dented the ever- increasing number of new melanomas diagnosed each year.

"That's why I'm so passionate about the MRA Dermatology Fellowship. It advances melanoma prevention and early detection by supporting dermatologists- and scientists-in-training to focus their career on melanoma and research," says Denise. "For a young dermatologist, the lure of

cosmetic dermatology is undeniable. Research is unquestionably important, but it can also be the high road. This program gives them another viable alternative."

She and her husband Michael underwrote the development of MRA's Dermatology Fellowship program and its inaugural cohort of nine fellows in 2019. In 2020, the program selected an expanded cohort of 13 fellows.

"I've had the good fortune of being under the care of dermatologists since I was ten-years old," says Denise. "It was made clear to me – at a very young age – that this was a personal issue. Now, I'm doing what I can to help encourage the sea change that helps other people understand that this is personal to them too."

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http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/denise-kellen-mission-advance-melanoma-prevention-early-detection