

# STRIPPING CANCER OF IT'S POWER

## Embracing the beauty in being bald

By Kelly Heiniger

Each year, the women of Badin Hall purchase and organize the decorations for The Bald and The Beautiful's April event. For their dorm, TBAB hits close to home. Their rec-

tor, Sister Denise Lyon, is a cancer survivor.

In the winter of 1997, Sister Denise was diagnosed with Stage 3 uterine cancer and stage 1 ovarian cancer;

she was given six months to live post-surgery. Before beginning chemotherapy, she went to a salon to have her hair color taken, in the hopes they could match her natural color with a wig. The salon worker offered to shave Sister Denise's hair before it began falling out, an idea she quickly rebuked. Just one month after beginning chemotherapy, Sister took a weekend trip to the beach with friends. Although she did not realize it, chemo was taking its toll, causing her hair to fall out. Knowing how fussy she was about her hair, her friends refrained from telling her what was happening. By the end of the weekend, though, they decided to let her know. The day after her beach trip, Sister was in the salon chair having her head shaved.

When explaining the impact of this decision, Sister Denise said, "For a woman, one of the biggest shocks when you're told you have cancer and know you'll have chemo is the thought, 'I'll lose my hair.' In the whole picture that's a small issue, but in your whole world, it's a huge issue. As a woman, you're not worried about the cancer; you're worried about your hair. As you go through the process, it takes





on a new light. It's huge— maybe even bigger than the cancer. It's something you see and experience."

After shaving her head, Sister Denise received a terrific wig that matched her hair so well no one even knew she was wearing it. She wore the wig until the weather turned warm. On a particularly warm day, Sister remembers standing in front of the mirror, her head hot and itchy; she took off the wig and thought, "You have cancer. This is part of who you are. This is part of your identity." From then on, Sister Denise didn't wear her wig, choosing instead to accept cancer as part of who she was, something she would live with for the rest of her life. Even now, living "clinically clear," she knows this is part of her identity, and that the cancer could always return.

Sister embraced and enjoyed being bald, and she

came to understand that embracing her bald head meant taking away the power of the cancer. She believes this is one of TBABs greatest powers. By shaving their own heads and offering to feel a bit of what a cancer patient feels, partici-

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pants take away some of cancer's power: its power to inflict pain by taking away a patient's hair; its power to make a patient ashamed of going in public without hair; and its power to make a patient a victim by taking his or her hair. Participants who voluntarily choose to shave their heads or donate their hair remove some of the embarrassment cancer patients feel from not having hair.

Through the work of TBAB, Sister Denise can see cancer's power diminishing and

being given back to patients through wig donations and solidarity. She encourages anyone who feels called to donate their hair to make the decision and to move forward with their choice, "This experience and event gives everyone an awareness and knowledge of what [cancer patients] live with."

Sister Denise acknowledges that for a while, she needed her wig. After some time, though, she learned to accept cancer as part of her life, and decided to take back the power by embracing her baldness. She believes donating hair to make wigs can help others reach the point she reached. With a wig for the first few months, sister was able to accept herself and become a whole person--without her hair--on her own time.

*This month's article incorporates the color teal in honor of Ovarian cancer awareness*