

## Elaine Johnson receives Broad Shoulders Award

by Nikki Rosenberg

With her innately positive attitude and life-long calling to help people, nurse Elaine Johnson provides comfort, support or a smile to all she encounters. Inspired by Johnson's unwavering attitude of hope and courage, her friend and supervisor Esther Valdez nominated her for Houston Woman Magazine's 2010 Broad Shoulders Award. Johnson received the award at the Fourth Annual Nominate HER Awards Luncheon on May 21 at La Colombe d'Or Mansion.

Johnson has a 47-year career of helping people. While still in high school, she volunteered at a hospital and realized her vocation.

"I wanted to be able to help someone through something and try to make it a little easier, a little better," Johnson said.

She received her degree in nursing from Roosevelt Hospital, a diploma hospital in New York City. Her former husband's job brought the couple to the south, where they moved between Louisiana and Houston for a number of years. During that time, Johnson practiced nursing in various hospitals, including Charity Hospital in New Orleans.

In 1978, Johnson became partially paralyzed from a spinal surgery. She was able to walk with a cane and braces until her arthritis made it too difficult. For the last five years or so, she has used a wheelchair to remain active.

Johnson said with a laugh, "I've been slowed down for 32 years, but now I'm a speed demon in my wheelchair."

While Johnson reared her two boys, Michael and Randy, she took a 20-year break from nursing. Even so, she volunteered at local hospitals and clinics, as well as a volunteer EMT.

"I was in charge of hand-holding on the ambulance," said Johnson. "I couldn't do the physical part, but I could hold the patients' hands and support them."

When she was ready to go back to work, she was challenged to find a nursing position that did not require intense physical labor. Through her connections from volunteering, Johnson was hired at Houston Northwest Medical Center's Nurse Health Line where she answered health related questions from callers.

Johnson said, "When I got that job, my son said, 'That's great! You've found a job where you can sit and talk on the phone. You've been practicing for years!'"

When the hospital closed the line in 1999, Johnson began her current position in The Breast Center. There, she is responsible for calling patients who will need to return for additional testing.

Valdez said, “She is the voice of reason and calm when she does the call-backs. Having someone who can take the time to talk and answer questions is important. Being able to put the patient at ease, and tell her she’s not being called because she has breast cancer, but because she needs additional tests, takes a very special kind of person. And we found that in Elaine.”

In addition to volunteering as a facilitator for the American Cancer Society’s support group, “Care, Share and Be Aware,” Johnson has supported the Komen Race for the Cure and the Breast Cancer Network of Strength Walk. She is a board member of The Weathervane Foundation, which raises money to fund breast cancer research.

She serves as program coordinator and vice president of the Bluebonnet Critical Incident Stress Management Team. The non-profit organization works with emergency service departments after traumatic events.

Helping others has helped Johnson stay positive about life and face her own challenges.

She said, “You learn more about other people and see what you have as an individual is not as bad as some people have it. I’ve always had the feeling that I got more back out of volunteering than I gave. Volunteering has helped me appreciate my life more.

“It’s the same with the breast cancer survivors, I’ve learned so much from those women...It’s not a job; it’s not an effort. It’s a pleasure.”

Johnson also pushes people to try new things. Although it took much convincing to get her on the slopes 15 years ago, she has been an avid skier ever since.

Johnson said, “When I started doing it, I thought, ‘Holy mackerel, if I can do this - if I can go out and go skiing and do all they taught me - there’s just a whole lot more I can do.’ So, I try to motivate people to give things a try, to see what it can do for your life.”

Nikki Rosenberg is a reporter for Houston Woman Magazine.