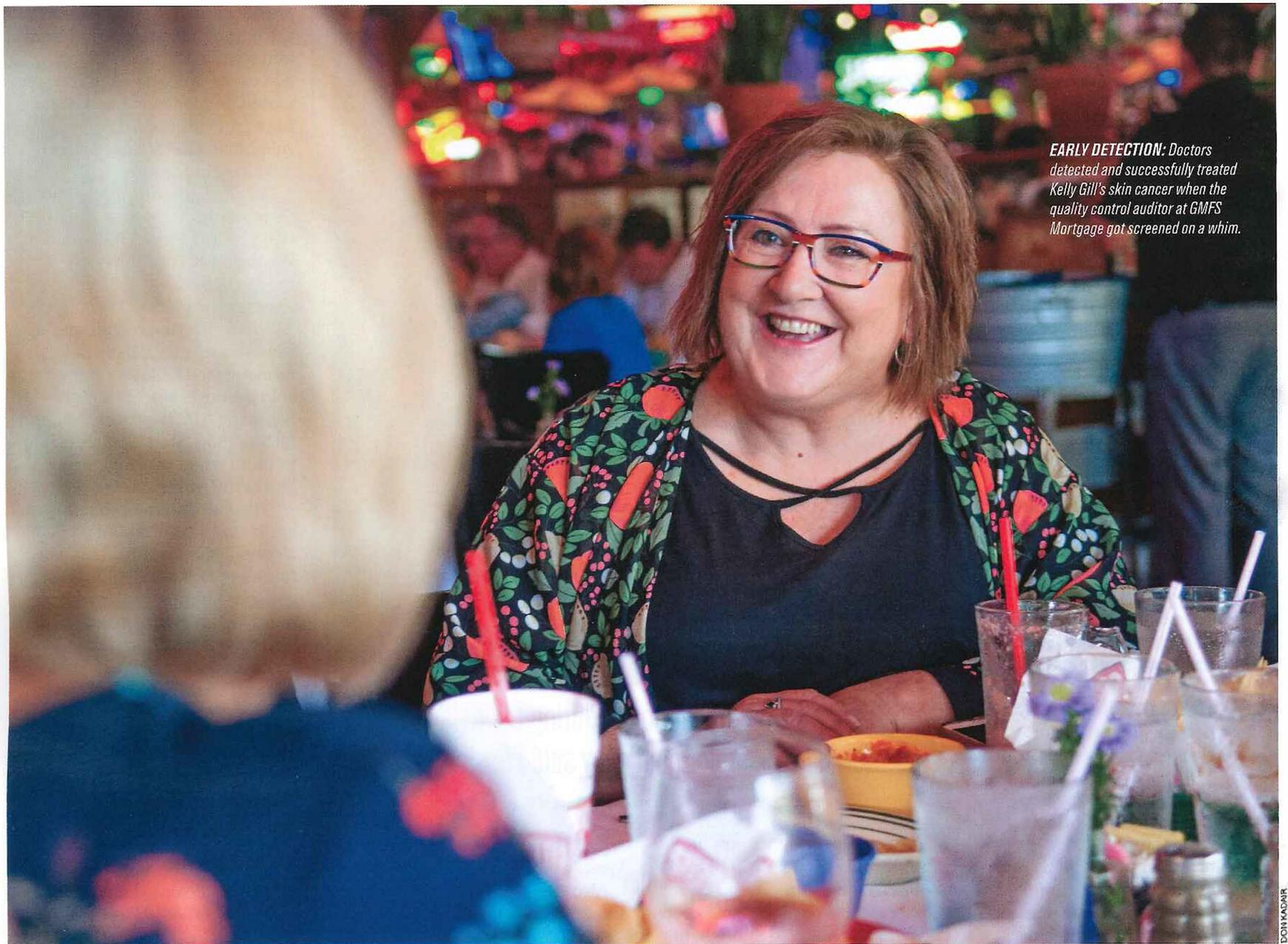


## HEALTH CARE



**EARLY DETECTION:** Doctors detected and successfully treated Kelly Gill's skin cancer when the quality control auditor at GMFS Mortgage got screened on a whim.

## Bringing early cancer detection to you

A growing number of Baton Rouge companies are participating in the Prevention on the Go-Workplace program that educates employees about cancer and screens for early detection. **BY CAITIE BURKES**

**KELLY GILL STILL** carries in her wallet a printed Google image of a man suffering from basal-cell carcinoma—a type of skin cancer that when first visible looks something like a mosquito bite, but, in this case, ultimately spread and disfigured the photographed man's face with a puffy red tumor masking his nose and eye socket. Today, Gill can't help but think: That could've been me.

Of course, a basal-cell carcinoma diagnosis was the last thing Gill, a quality control auditor at GMFS Mortgage, was thinking

about at work on an October day when she strolled into a skin cancer screening offered by the Prevention on the Go-Workplace program.

The program marks a joint effort between the Mary Bird Perkins-Our Lady of the Lake Cancer Center and the Albermarle Foundation to educate employees about cancer, and to prevent and detect different types of cancer early in corporate environments. As a participating company, GMFS offers its employees opportunities to walk

down the hall during work hours to get a quick screening. Gill, on a whim, took advantage off the offer, having noticed a small red dot on her nose.

"I told the doctor, 'I'm probably wasting your time,'" recalls Gill, a self-described "sunscreen queen" who had never visited a dermatologist. "But with them just being across the hall, I thought, 'Let me check this out.'"

The doctor who saw Gill suspected the red dot was a carcinoma and recommended she visit a dermatologist. Within two weeks, Gill was officially diagnosed and underwent surgery. Medical professionals caught the skin cancer early enough to remove it entirely.

Gill's cancer was among 24 diagnoses that came from the program between its August 2016 launch and May 2019 screenings. Since its June 2016 pilot, Mary Bird Perkins-OLOL has also reported removals of 109 pre-cancerous lesions—including one oral lesion—from program participants. Other program results include significant lifestyle changes; for example, some employees have quit smoking cold-turkey after getting screened, while others have begun scheduling regular medical check-ups.

Its promising outcomes are encouraging more employers—23 throughout Louisiana, to date—to purchase the screenings as an add-on service in their companies' wellness packages. In a state with the fourth-highest cancer-related mortality rate in the country, the service is especially appealing to Baton Rouge's corporate scene.

"When you hear the word 'cancer,' you often think the worst," says Renea Duffin, Mary Bird Perkins-OLOL vice president of cancer support and outreach. "But cancer no longer has to be a death sentence if it's caught early."

#### WHO'S HEALTH IS IT, ANYWAY?

Since when did diagnosing cancer become a company's responsibility to its workers? Perhaps surprisingly, despite increasing national attention toward health and wellness in the workplace, few initiatives like the Prevention on the Go-Workplace program



**DUCE OF PREVENTIONS:** Doctors and nurses participating in the program visit area businesses to provide medical prevention screenings for the company's employees. Here, GMFS Mortgage employee Kim Thompson is screened by Dr. Robert Peden.

exist in the U.S., let alone in Louisiana.

But Mary Bird Perkins-OLOL saw a need several years ago, says Duffin, after noticing many people diagnosed through the center's community prevention program were employed and had access to health insurance, but had never been screened before.

It's since been validated: Though 99% of workplace program participants were insured, some 57% had never been screened for cancer before. They discovered, says Duffin, that even people with the means to get screened often don't.

Sometimes, it's because people are unaware of the screening services offered. But others simply avoid the inconvenience of leaving and returning to work, or taking a sick day, to drive to a doctor's appointment.

The observation prompted the Albermarle Foundation to donate a multiyear gift—\$200,000 each year for five years, totaling \$1 million—to help kickstart the cancer center's expansion of its community education and early detection program to the corporate world. Once the gifting period ends, the program will live

on through self-generating funds from participating companies.

"It just reveals that some employers care—and when they take advantage of the program, others need to take notice," says Sandra Holub, executive director of the Albermarle Foundation, which also participates. "When you see that 1.5 percent or 3 percent of your employees had cancer they could detect early on, the price of the program becomes negligible."

Other local employers say adding the program has helped drive down their bottom lines. Not only are fewer health insurance claims filed, but their workers are healthier, making them more productive and more likely to stay longer with the company.

Over the next year, MMR Group plans to roll out the educational programming and mobile units to the rest of its Louisiana district offices, says President and CEO Pepper Rutland, given the success of its first experience with 137 participating employees at MMR's administrative campus on Airline Highway.

"Our only reservation was whether our employees would use the program to the extent we hoped they would," Rutland says.

"Now, we only wish we would've done it sooner."

It's part of a month-long health and wellness campaign the company is launching next spring, during which three different screenings, including one for breast cancer, will be offered to employees, who will also be able to sign up for educational sessions.

As a breast cancer survivor, Vicki Crochet, executive committee vice-chair and labor and employment practice leader for Taylor Porter, says enrolling the law firm in the Prevention on the Go-Workplace program was a no-brainer—especially after Mary Bird Perkins-OLOL accommodated its microsite to fit the firm's potentially tricky location in the Chase North Tower downtown.

Precancerous lesions were removed from three Taylor Porter participants during the firm's first on-site screening in April. Taylor Porter has since reenrolled, hoping to attract even more participants the next time around.

All that should take is word of mouth, says Crochet, as the stories speak for themselves.

"This heightens folks' sensitivity to the importance of the issue," she says. "It wasn't a very hard sell." ■

## SCREENING THE NUMBERS

1,879

Total participants

57%

Participants never previously screened

109

Pre-cancerous lesions removed

24

Skin cancers diagnosed

SOURCE: Mary Bird Perkins-OLOL Cancer Center. Reflects results between June 2016 and May 2019.