

ERNEST HOOPER: MANY ROLES IN BATTLE AGAINST CANCER, 3B

# TAMPA & STATE

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## 'Big Mama' shows us how to live



Melba Martinez has seen support groups grow.

Melba Martinez is many things to many people: sister, daughter, aunt, nurse, pioneer, confidant, counselor, translator and cancer survivor.

The Susan G. Komen Foundation adds her.

Eleven years ago, after waging her own battle against breast cancer,

Martinez went to the American Cancer Society and offered her services as a volunteer. Her efforts eventually bloomed into a support group for Hispanic women battling breast cancer, and that group has mushroomed into support units across the bay.

"For the people in my group, I am their 'Big Mama'," Martinez said with a laugh on Tuesday.

The Komen Foundation, which

kicks off its annual Race For The Cure season today at the Blue Martini at International Plaza, recently named Martinez a "local hero" for her efforts. Martinez also has been recognized by other community groups, but she is not resting on her laurels.

"My problem is I have to work," said Martinez, who is a nurse at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center. "If I could I would give them 16 hours a day."

**RECENTLY, SHE NOTICED** a dichotomy in her primary support group, which meets at St. Joseph's Cancer Institute. There were patients as old as 65 and as young as 22.

"The problems a 22-year-old with breast cancer will find are going to be different than what you're going to find when you're 65," she said. "If you're 22, you may be a single mom, you may be single and looking for someone or you may be a newly wed.

These people needed different topics."

So Martinez created a group for Hispanic women younger than 40. She says the information disseminated to the younger group touches upon topics younger women would be interested in such as how treatments could impact future pregnancies, and how women should go about revealing their bodies to new husbands.

The group is helping, but Martinez says its difficult to see young women battle with breast cancer.

"When you are 22, you're a baby," Martinez said. "When (a patient) came to our meeting and said she was 22, I just wanted to give my life for her."

In fact, the most disturbing aspect about her support group is the growth. She started with just five members who, like herself, wanted information in Spanish and comfort from someone who understands their

language and culture.

The group quickly grew to more than 50 members and broke off into separate groups in Clearwater and Brandon. Martinez, however longs for the day when membership declines.

"I wish that I didn't have anybody because that would mean everybody is healthy," said Martinez, who spends a good deal of her free time speaking to Hispanic churches and working with Spanish-language media to raise awareness.

"I started with awareness because I saw the group was growing too fast. To me that as sad. I kept wondering why every month we had more people here. Maybe it's because they don't hear announcements on English TV, or they don't listen to English radio stations or they may not read English papers."

**AWARENESS WILL** be a goal of tonight's event at the Blue Martini.



ERNEST HOOPER  
COLUMNIST

The "Pink Martini" happy hour runs from 5 to 8 p.m. and will feature music, appetizers, a silent auction and two drink tickets good for the specialty martini or wine.

Tickets are \$30 through [komensuncoast.com](http://komensuncoast.com) or \$35 at the door, and the first 500 attendees get a free bag from Iridesse Pearls. This is just one of several events leading up to the eight annual Race For The Cure which will be held Oct. 8 at Vinoy Park in St. Petersburg.

Martinez worked as a volunteer at last year's Pink Martini event and was hopeful to do the same tonight. However, she must tend to her 40-year old brother, David.

He is recovering from prostate cancer surgery.