

"I'm so glad I just have cancer..." by donna scott

I was transcribing the dictation for a neurologic patient with a bleak prognosis. I turned to my coworker and said, "I'm so glad I just have cancer." I can say that now, but I certainly didn't always feel that way. Cancer is an ugly word and an even uglier disease. It attacks not only your body, but also your spirit.

I received the call in the late afternoon on November 30, 2004. "Your tests came back positive." It felt like a blow to my stomach. Eleven months earlier, I had blindly accepted that the lump appearing on my ultrasound was only a "benign lymph node." My mind immediately raced to a few years earlier when my niece had died from breast cancer. She had put off going to the doctor for about a year. By the time she went for treatment, her cancer had spread and she only lived for one more year. From somewhat similar situations, I rationalized that I would be dead in a year.

I climbed on the roller coaster. My emotions went up and down—fear, anger, depression, and frustration. I was scheduled for surgery the day after being diagnosed and, amazingly, I slept fairly well that night. However, when I woke up in the morning and began to get ready to go to the hospital, I started "bouncing off the walls." I called Roger in tears. Shortly, he was there giving me the hug that I so much needed. Then there was a knock at the door. There stood Mike with a report that he needed typed. When I told him I was going in for surgery, his response was "What time?" Talk about a blessing in disguise—I typed the report while I was waiting for my daughter, Jodi, to arrive to take me to the hospital. It busied my mind and helped calm my nerves.

The surgery was quite uneventful and Jodi, Cathi, and Roger were all there when I returned to my room. I was actually euphoric after the surgery when, amazingly, my sentinel node and five other nodes came back clean. Now I rationalized that I would only need radiation and that didn't seem so bad. However, the euphoria was short-lived. My tumor had grown 2½ times in size in 11 months and my surgeon's direction was "If your oncologist doesn't recommend chemo, I think you should get a second opinion."

There was always one more thing! Now I had to choose an oncologist. What did I know about oncologists and where should I start? Another blessing in disguise—Jodi asked if I would mind going to the Avera Cancer Institute. Since she worked across the street, it would make it easy for her to stop over if for some reason I needed her. I narrowed it down to two, based on recommendations, and then did a little checking on my own. My decision was made—it would be Dr. Tolentino.

I had my first appointment at the Avera Cancer Institute in the middle of December. My first contact was Sue, who was Dr. Tolentino's nurse at the time. She has the gift of putting the patient at ease. It wasn't long into the appointment with Dr. Tolentino that I knew I made the right choice. He is a caring, gentle man. We started from the very beginning—the diagnosis, the stage of the cancer, the treatment options, and the expected outcome. As he talked, he was jotting down information on a sheet of paper, which he gave to me at the end of the appointment. (I referred back to this sheet many times.) Also, he spoke directly to me the

entire time, not to my daughter, the physician, but to me. He only addressed her when she asked a question. This gave me a sense of calm in that I knew I was his priority.

Cancer was on hold! My kids came from Minneapolis and the entire family celebrated the holidays and, for the most part, we didn't even talk about cancer. For now, life was good.

January arrived and once again I started "bouncing off the walls." I wasn't sure which I was more afraid of—the chemo or the fact that these "nasty little cells" were crawling around in my body just waiting to get energized somewhere else. Jodi's response took me by surprise. "Mom, that's why you need to see chemo as your friend." Now that's an interesting concept—chemo, my friend? Over the next few months, I would continue to remind myself that chemo was my friend.

It was time for the port placement. Jodi took me in for surgery and then directly over to the Cancer Institute for my first infusion—another very scary first! There I found nurses who would listen to my fears and give me the reassurance that I needed. In fact, Dan, the nurse who administered my first treatment, told me he was only giving me "red Kool-Aid." Wow, that sounded much less threatening than Adriamycin with all of its side effects.

I was just adjusting to the changes in my life and then the "hair issue" popped up. I went over to the American Cancer Society to get my free wig, as this was before the Wig Salon was open. What did I know about picking out a wig, how to put it on, or choosing a size? I arrived home just as Marchi, my neighbor who is also a breast cancer survivor, was leaving. When she asked how I was doing, I showed her my bag of "goodies" and began to cry. After giving me a hug, she told me about her friend who, during treatment, had a great wig that looked exactly like her hair. "When I get home, I'll call her and find out who her wig person was." Thankfully, that person was Del Lomheim.

I made an appointment with Del. On a cold, blustery, winter evening, Jodi, my two-year-old granddaughter Ellie, and I set off to see Del—another special person who walked into my life. Del knows a lot about wigs, but her greater gift is her sensitivity to your needs at a time when you really need it. I tried on many wigs—different colors and different styles. She helped me decide on one that looked like me and then ordered it. (Ellie wanted "green hair," but we decided not to go there.) I hated even wearing hats, but soon my wig became a permanent part of my wardrobe. Once I put it on, I suddenly felt "normal." People didn't look at me and see cancer. They saw me.

Over the next few weeks, I made many trips to the Cancer Institute. Sue was always my first stop and she made me feel that every problem, no matter how small, was important. She would always listen and give good suggestions.

Cancer treatment isn't easy. I had many ups and downs, but I think I survived treatment pretty well. After I completed my chemotherapy, I continued to go for Herceptin therapy once a week for a year. When I was done, I actually felt a sense of loss—I wouldn't be visiting my friends every week anymore.

I AM A SURVIVOR, but I certainly didn't do it alone. I had the love and support of my family and friends, as well as my caregivers. Each of them has become a part of my healing process.

My friend, Jerome Freeman, practices medicine, as well as writing poetry and essays. In one of his books, *THE COLORS OF CARE—WHAT ARE THOSE DOCTORS THINKING?*, there is a quote that has particular meaning for me.

"One of the aspects of my medical practice that most amazes me is how patients and families handle the brutal intrusions of illness and loss that can disrupt their lives. It seems to me that acts of caring, sometimes so subtle as to seem inconsequential, are what sustain people. All of us are fortunate when we have opportunities for caring interaction and seize upon them."

I believe that all of the "angels" in my life—whether family, friends, or caregivers—have "seized upon the opportunities for caring interaction" and made my journey much easier.