

Survivor Spotlight

A Positive Approach

By: Rhonda Washer
Breast Cancer Survivor

In August 1998 I found a lump in my breast and was diagnosed with Breast Cancer. I underwent a mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiation. When I got that awful message that I had cancer, I realized that I had to summon everything I had within me and everything around me to fight the battle. I was brought up in the Jewish religion and my belief in God has always been a part of my life. I believe that God leads us in the paths to take and leads others to help us in our experiences. There were many prayer chains established and healing circles formed for me. I now feel that I am being led to help others also. For me, taking this experience and transforming it into something that can help others has been a real positive experience.

As I live my life after surgery, I am taking a positive approach to keeping my body well. I take holistic alternative actions by taking supplements, chiropractic care, cleansings and bodywork. I believe God intends for us to take care of ourselves. If we expose ourselves to toxic environments, toxic foods and toxic relationships, then we are not taking care of our temples, our bodies that God created so beautifully.

I feel well and I continue to take care of myself. I take the time to listen and take the time to pray and often pray more than once a day. I feel led by God in everything I do. It's a spiritual thing. When I go for walks, I enjoy listening to spiritual music. I have found a recording by a Jewish songwriter, Debbie Freedman, (Renewal of Spirit) to be very uplifting.

Whether the cancer is gone or not, isn't the point. The point is I am healed in many, many ways. Am I cured? I don't know. Am I healed? Very much so. And I have a peace that can only come from my relationship with God.

One Year Survivor

By: Pat Garmer

I am a testament to having regular mammograms. My tumor was very small, removed with clean area all around, and I only required 37 radiation treatments and no chemotherapy. I participated in the very first Race for the Cure in Peoria. I don't remember what year it was, but I do recall that packet pick-up was at the YWCA at Lakeview, and received a cloth goody bag and a long sleeved T-shirt. I've participated in most of the races, especially after my second granddaughter was born. I decided that the first year she could walk; this would be our "thing" to do together. She was born in February and participated the following year. She was on TV and everything. We made it all the way from the back of the group across the START line (that's right, we just made it to University). Some of the merchants waited for us, and clapped when we finally got there. The TV crew was actually already shut down but started again and followed Audrey for about 10 feet. We have that on tape still and add our own video to it each year.

When my daughter-in-law lived with us for a year while my son was in Korea, she gave birth to twin girls in February. So that year, I had quite a group out there. I used to make the shirts into a dress for Audrey, so when I had the twins to dress for the race, I cut a shirt in half. With some good guess work and a little effort, the two of them each had a shirt, and together they made one shirt. Since the Three Miles of Men has begun, my husband, grandsons and son-in-law have been there to support the Komen Peoria Race for the Cure®. Now they are there to support me. Look for me this year; I'll have on the pink hat and shirt and a flag jacket. Come up and say hello; I'll give you a hug.

Why Me?

Pearlie Harris
Survivor

My name is Pearlie M. Harris. I was diagnosed with breast cancer on Feb. 3, 1999. It was just like a bomb dropped on me. I was the one who found it. So I went to see if it was the truth. It was. They told me to go into a room and the doctor would be in to talk to me. I was sitting there, tears rolling down my face. Cry, cry, cry I just could not stop. I kept telling myself, "It's going to be alright."

I felt like I was all down, like I didn't have anyone. I looked up to God and asked, "Why me Lord? Why me?" I prayed

and prayed, asking God to give me support. As I sat there, I had this feeling of an angel putting her arm around me and saying, "Everything is going to be alright."

My husband was so supportive of me. Without him in my life, I would not be here to tell this story. My husband's family was there for me, too. They were a big help to me. I am so grateful to have them in my life. The cancer was a hard battle not only for me, but for my husband as well. Coping with the emotion was very stressful. It hurt watching my hair fall out and going through the pain which I wouldn't wish on anybody.

As time went on, I got stronger and stronger. What feeds my fear of cancer is that it might come back. I feel myself tightening in fear as I clutch my breast to my chest, my shoulder hunched out. But I know that won't help. I don't want to die of breast cancer. I don't want my sister or anyone to get it.

Breast cancer is a dance of initiation, for no woman who dances with cancer is ever the same. Breast cancer doesn't care what color your skin is. Breast cancer doesn't care who you love or who you sleep with. Breast cancer can't be prevented by being rich. Breast cancer concerns all of us. That is why it is very important that we as women get a mammogram and go to support groups that fight breast cancer. I thank God I am a five-year survivor. I also thank the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation for all its help and support.

Two Time Survivor

By: Debie Fitzanko

Self Examination saved my life, not once but twice. At 33 years old, I never thought much about breast cancer. I did exams, but not regularly. I was a working mother with 2 small children. I was just too busy to think about a simple breast exam, until I rolled over in bed and felt a large lump in my left breast. My morning shower confirmed it.

After testing and a biopsy, it was official, I had breast cancer. No one in my family had ever had breast cancer. I wasn't supposed to be in that high risk category. The lump was the size of a large chicken egg. Fortunately, it was contained and hadn't spread into the lymph nodes.

I felt my only option was to have my breast removed. The surgery and recovery went well, at least physically. Unfortunately, emotionally my family was devastated.

My children were too young to understand my illness and recovery. Yet, my husband wasn't able to deal with the added responsibility of my illness. The doctor recommended counseling as many husbands are affected by their wife's cancer. Our separation lasted 8 months. This forced me to go back to work to a job that demoted me for missing 6 weeks of work for being sick.

But life goes on, and things got better. Family, friends, and humor got me through the hard times. Then in Oct. of 1996, 9 years after my first cancer scare, I found something in my right breast. It didn't really feel like a lump, just different. Plus looking in the mirror, it just looked different. It was 3 months before my next check-up, but I didn't want to wait.

My worse fear was again confirmed! CANCER! This time the cancer was aggressive and had already spread to the lymph nodes. I was already a survivor. I knew I'd make it again. Chemo was rough, but I did have the easy care hairstyle (bald).

My goal was to be strong enough to walk in the '97 Komen Peoria Race for the Cure®. I was, and I spray painted my hair stubs "Hot Pink". As a 2 time survivor, I've been cancer free for five years. I continue to promote breast exams and mammograms to all my friends, family and co-workers. Cancer has changed my life! I think I was living in a fog, just taking life for granted. Now, I know I have things to accomplish, places to go, clubs to join, and life to really enjoy.

Men Are Not Free From Breast Cancer

By: Jim Gustafson

Retired Kellar and Hines School Principal Survivor

It was April 1981 and I was 44 years old. Following a serious automobile accident that left my right breast black and blue, I noticed a very small lump under the nipple area. I wasn't concerned, but six months later I had a regular

appointment with my rheumatoidologist, Dr. Joe Couri. When I mentioned the accident and my bruised breast he immediately examined me. He was concerned about the lump and wanted me to have a biopsy right away. I was reluctant because I had never heard of men having breast cancer. Later Dr. Joe told me his mother had died of breast cancer and my lump felt very much like hers.

Dr. Stuart Roberts, an outstanding surgeon and friend did the biopsy. He felt sure it was benign, but discussed that in the event it was cancer he would consult with my wife and do what was best in his opinion. Surprisingly, it was malignant and Dr. Roberts removed my right breast and lymph nodes under my right arm. The lymph nodes came back clean, but Dr. Roberts, after consulting with Sloan Kettering Cancer Institute, thought that as a precaution I should have a series of low dose radiation treatments. I made a good recovery and that was 24 years ago.

Men need to be aware of any lump in their breast area and consult a doctor without delay. Later the principal of Richwoods High School at the time told me his father had died of breast cancer because he waited too long before seeing a doctor. I thank the quick action taken by my two great doctors for enabling me to beat breast cancer and say that I am a survivor.