

MY JOURNEY

I've had numerous titles in my life: daughter, sister, wife, mom, friend, and oh yeah, Cancer Survivor. That last one was a shock. CANCER....Survivor.

Two months before my 50th birthday in 2016, I went to the doctor as I had this lump for over a year. Doctors couldn't feel it, sonogram and mammogram didn't see it. Well this time was different. The P.A. felt it and said, "What the heck?" I told her that was my question. So off to get a mammo and then a sono. My breast tissue was so dense they said, even the 3D mammogram didn't pick it up. I remember it so clearly sitting on the sonogram table waiting for the radiologist to come in. I was at the Women's Center across from St. Vincent's. The radiologist came in and said "I'd like you to have a needle biopsy. It looks..." I just stared at her. I said, "Just tell me, just be straight!" She said "It definitely looks like cancer. I'm about 98% sure." All the blood drained to my feet and I put my head in my hands. My worst fear EVER just came true. The nurse navigator came to get me to sit me in her office. I called my daughter, Rachel, as she was working across the street at the hospital. She came right over and I couldn't even mutter the words. The nurse navigator had to tell her that the doctors were pretty sure it was cancer. Rachel wrapped her arms around me as I cried and she assured me we would get through this. We went home and I made the phone calls to my family and friends. I figured the more people that knew, the more prayers would be going up. I was so right. I felt every single person's prayer for me and it truly got me through.

I had the needle biopsy done and what should have taken a week at the latest to get results took two-and-a-half weeks. The waiting was awful. Dr. Schattner called and said I had a pretty large mass (3.5cm) called Metaplastic Carcinoma with Spindle Cell cancer. Very rare form of cancer, only 1% of people with cancer have this. (However, Spindle Cell cancer is common in dogs...weird.) Here I am with a rare form of cancer and scared to death. What do I do now? He suggested a mastectomy. I remember crying after I hung up the phone.

My appointment with Dr. Schattner was something I'll never forget. I walked in with my entourage of my husband, my daughter, my amazing friend, Liz, and my nurse navigator, Linda. Dr. Schattner was describing how this rare cancer I have is actually a good kind. (Say what?) Seems this spindle cell cancer is formed like a malted milk ball. All the bad stuff inside is surrounded by a hard outer shell, making it less likely to spread. We just stared at him. He looked at me and said, "You're not going to die from this." I just grabbed his hand and said "Thank God!" The relief we were feeling was amazing. He said that when he does the mastectomy, he would check the lymph nodes and that would determine treatment. We walked out of the exam room and I called to him down the hall and said, "Dr. Schattner, does this breast tumor make my butt look big??" He just stared at me and said, "Um, no. Go home now!" It was then that I realized I will try to be positive and make jokes to get through this frigging cancer ordeal. Laughter is the best medicine, right?

August 5, 2016 was the day. I decided to have a double mastectomy with reconstruction. Well the reconstruction didn't work out as the blood flow in the tissue wasn't that great. The lymph nodes looked fine, the doctor said. Recovery was pretty easy actually. No pain at all from the surgery. The drains were a big pain though. I felt like a Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon with these tubes hanging off me. Fast forward a couple weeks to meet with the docs at Regional Cancer Center. I was so scared that I'd need chemo and what that would do to my body and would it make my asthma worse if I got a cold? So many thoughts. No hair? I wouldn't make an attractive bald person...my head is too big. I was overjoyed when both cancer doctors told me no chemo, no radiation. The mastectomy was enough since my lymph nodes weren't involved. Hallelujah!!!! I jumped off the table and hugged Dr. Seastone.

Met with the plastic surgeon about getting reconstruction and he said not enough tissue was left to do the implants and I'd have to do a "latissimus flap" procedure to support the new breasts. I checked into what exactly that was and saw it was 9 HOURS of surgery and MONTHS of recovery. Um, no thank you. My recovery from the mastectomy surgery was relatively easy and I didn't want to push the envelope so I chose to stay flat. When I say

it was relatively easy, I mean the pain. The emotional part was not easy. I couldn't look at my chest the first time we changed the bandages. I was never this sexual dynamo but when your breasts are gone, you just stand there and look at yourself in the mirror in disbelief. It's such a different feeling to look at your chest and see nothing...nothing but scars all the way across your chest. I would automatically cover my chest in front of my husband. I was self-conscious. After a few months, I got to thinking that my flat chest is now a blank canvas. What if I got my chest and the scars tattooed over? It would be something to look at instead of nothing.

By this time, I had joined Linked by Pink after Becky Maxson had reached out to me, gave me my welcome bag and talked to me over coffee. At first I felt that maybe I shouldn't be in the group as my cancer was cured and my treatment was just the mastectomy. Becky reminded me that I did, in fact, have CANCER and I had every right to be in the group, that I belonged. (Love you, Becky!) All my pink sisters welcomed me and the wealth of information they have is astounding! I realized I would spread the word about LBP and all that they do for the breast cancer patients in our community.

As I searched for the right tattoo for my chest, I found out that Linked by Pink would pay for part of the tattoo with their Wellness Grant. Wow!!!! Originally, I wanted a plaid bikini top tattooed so I could go topless. I knew I had to have plaid incorporated in my tattoo as plaid is my favorite color!! I then decided to get something that shows the passing of time, the changing of the four seasons with maple leaves. I met with Kevin Burfield of Wayward Tattoo and he drew up a sketch. Yep, just what I wanted, even got one of the maple leaves with plaid on it. Now I have something to look at on my chest and it's beautiful. I've showed pretty much everybody I know including my orthopedic surgeon, my dental hygienist and my eye doctor. My hope is that it will encourage other mastectomy patients to think of their flat chest as a blank canvas to create something beautiful. Cancer may have taken my breasts but I took control of what was left.

~Annie Drozdowski
Erie, PA