

When I was young I thought that I was invincible. I would never have cancer. Things like that only happened to people you didn't know. Then one day in March of 1992 while taking a shower I felt a lump in my left breast. Since I was only 44 years old and invincible I was sure it was nothing serious. To be safe, I went to my doctor and he sent me for a mammogram. When he got the report back he sent me to a surgeon who told me that it looked like cancer. When I heard that I went numb. I thought my life was over. After indulging in self pity and fear for about five minutes, I said "What's the next step?"

Surgery was scheduled for the next day. I was told that I may have to have a mastectomy. I was so relieved when I woke up and found out that only the lump had been removed. I was so vain at the time, I just wanted to get rid of the lump and keep my breast. That was a time when breast cancer wasn't discussed as openly as it is now. Thank goodness women are now encouraged to speak up and take control of their health.

About a week later I was back in the hospital for axillary node dissection which is removal of a wedge of tissue under the arm to check for cancer in the lymph nodes. The nodes were clean, but to make sure that no traces of cancer remained my surgeon advised a bone scan, four months of chemotherapy and eight weeks of radiation. After all that plus mammograms, blood tests and chest x-rays for five years I thought I was cured. Again thinking I was invincible, I quit having my follow-up testing--until a year and a half later.

In October of 1998 I felt another lump in the same breast. I had a biopsy and found out that I had breast cancer again. Because I waited so long to get tested, the lump was large and some lymph nodes were involved. At first I thought that I couldn't bear to go through it again, but then I sucked it up and started the treatment process. I had a modified radical mastectomy followed by chemotherapy. This time I felt much better during chemotherapy. I didn't take the pills that are prescribed to control nausea and anxiety since the extra medicine seemed to make me feel worse. I decided to only take what was necessary to kill the cancer cells. I could deal with the nausea without the extra drugs.

In June of 1999 I had reconstructive surgery. I also had a prophylactic mastectomy of the right breast to improve my chances of staying cancer free. Because of the radiation I had after the lumpectomy it wasn't feasible to have implants. After radiation the skin is no longer pliable. My only option for reconstruction was a bilateral TRAM flap in which the abdomen is cut from one side to the other and the transverse rectus abdominis muscle and abdominal tissue are used to form new breasts. It is pretty radical surgery and the recovery is very painful. Even now I have to be careful not to pull muscles in my abdominal area. If I had only known what the future held I would have had bilateral mastectomies with implants when I had the first breast cancer in 1992.

Anyway, I'm so happy and thankful to be alive and healthy now. I'm fortunate that I have a supportive, caring husband, family and friends who were there for me during my illness. I also had a team of wonderful doctors and I put my complete trust in them. We may have made a few mistakes along the way, but I'm here to say that there is life after breast cancer. Furthermore, treatments for breast cancer are improving all the time thanks to fund raising for research.

□One day I must have expressed some concern about dying to my wise and empathetic oncologist. He said "When you are in your eighties you won't even remember all this." He was right. It has been seventeen and a half years since I discovered that first lump and eleven years since the second one. I hardly ever think about having cancer or what I went through any more. When I worry about getting gray hair, I forget that twice I had no hair. When I complain about getting old, I almost forget that it is a privilege to be here. I now have all of my examinations, blood tests, chest x-rays and other medical tests as recommended.

Many times people have said to me "I don't know how you do it." My reply has always been "You don't have a choice. You just do what you have to do." It's a lot easier if you have a good attitude and a sense of humor. By the way, I still think I'm invincible!

Brenda Noah

17 year Survivor
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