

Today is May 1st, 2009. It is one year to the day that I got that phone call. Survivor Sisters, you know the one I'm talking about...

I was 35 years old, and I'd never given breast cancer a second thought. That was something that happened to other women - not me. Nobody in my family had ever had breast cancer, so I never worried about it. One night in March of last year, I was lying in bed unable to sleep. I'd never been good at remembering to do my monthly self breast exams. For some reason on that night - I did one. And there it was - the lump. I hate that word. And it was big. I thought - nah, it's got to be nothing. Of course, it was a Saturday, and I'd have to wait until Monday before I could do anything about it.

I credit my family doctor and his spunky nurse Judy (a breast cancer Survivor as well) with saving my life. I called the office first thing on Monday morning and left a message for Judy, "I found a lump in my breast." Five minutes hadn't gone by before she was calling my cell phone and commanding me to the doctor's office. They got me in for a mammogram that very day and an ultrasound the next day. Of course, there it was - a 2 cm egg-shaped lump with a "limited" blood supply. I brought my scans to my surgeon (another person I credit with saving my life) and had a consult. I still wasn't scared. Like I said ... not me. The surgeon recommended a lumpectomy, and I whole-heartedly agreed. Whatever this thing was, I wanted it out of me.

The one mistake I made was that I waited nearly four weeks to have the lumpectomy. I felt (stupid me) that it was more important for me to go to my cousin's out-of-state wedding first. So in late April, I had the lumpectomy. It was no big deal. I was home in a matter of hours, and it wasn't very painful. Still - I wasn't nervous at all. Isn't naiveté a wonderful thing? Anyway - on May 1st, the phone rang, and it was my surgeon. I didn't realize at the time that the fact that he was calling me himself was not a good thing. I said, "Hi Doc! How are you?" And I heard those words ... "I'm so sorry, Melanie. You have breast cancer." Ever have an out-of-body experience? I think I did at that moment. Then, I snapped back into reality when the sensation of being slapped by a wet fish came over me. He proceeded to tell me that it was DCIS. I was thanking the Green Earth that I'd done my research and I knew what DCIS was. He told me that he'd have to do a wide re-excision, and then I'd have a course of radiation therapy and I should be just fine. Ok - another snip, a few zaps, and back to normal, right? I hung up the phone. Then I freaked.

The hardest thing was telling my husband and telling my parents. Nobody ever tells you how to do that. "...um, can you pass the salt? I have breast cancer." Naturally, I delivered the news with very little grace. My nerves were frayed and I still felt like I was in a bad nightmare from which I could not awaken.

Less than two weeks later, I had another surgery. This one was much more painful. Now I was REALLY on pins and needles waiting for the lab results. I was a total wreck. It took 8 days to get those results. I knew it before I got the call. Something in my gut told me that it wasn't over; that I was going to lose my breast. One night I had a dream about my deceased Grandma. Grandma said, "Darlin ... you're going to lose your breast ... but you'll be ok, and I'll be there with you." The very next morning the surgeon called and told me that he hadn't gotten clear margins and that I would have to have a mastectomy. I couldn't believe it. After all I've been through in my life (diagnosed with Crohn's disease at age 28, severe endometriosis resulting in a complete hysterectomy at age 33) ... I mean, c'mon! Hadn't I already paid my dues?? Delivering this news to my husband and my parents was even worse. I was beyond terrified. I was afraid of everything about the whole thing. I was afraid of what I would look like, how I would feel, the post-op drain, whether or not I'd live or die. I went from a cocky, self-assured career woman to a frightened mouse overnight. Somehow I had to squelch all that fear and be strong for my loved ones. And I had to wait six weeks before mastectomy day.

I work as a Senior Human Resources Manager for a manufacturing company. Of course, being the career woman that I am, I continued to work throughout my ordeal. I only took a few days off after each surgery and then promptly got back to work. Work was like therapy. I work in a wonderful environment, and the people and the place were helping to keep me sane. During this whole time, a wonderful conspiracy was happening at work. One of my employees decided that she was going to do something to make my life as happy as she could. Deborah conspired with a few other employees and she built a garden for me right outside of my office window. She called it Melanie's Secret Garden. She wanted to create a place that I could look out upon and instantly feel happy and relaxed. Her

little project turned into a big production, and it ended up involving about 90% of the employees at my facility. I think I can count the number of times in my life that I was totally speechless. This was definitely one of them. Another one of my coworkers rallied troops in his own way ... he managed to gather 20 employees to donate their PTO to me so that I'd have enough PTO in my bank to cover my impending absence. Three thousand miles away in Portland Oregon, my boss and the HR Corporate group put together "TEAM MELANIE" in Portland's Race for the Cure. Like I said ... the support that I received was nothing short of incredible!

As mastectomy day loomed closer, I was feeling more and more empowered. My support system had grown, and my supporters were emanating such strength that it was boosting my courage. To make a long story short, the mastectomy successfully removed all remaining traces of cancer from my breast and I was able to have immediate reconstruction. At home, my husband was like a rock - constantly telling me how great I was doing and how wonderful I looked. And my parents were there with me every step of the way. I had two additional surgeries in the Fall & Winter of 2008 to complete the reconstruction process. For any woman out there who is facing mastectomy - I want you to know that it is not as horrible as you think. Don't get me wrong ... it's not a cakewalk, but it is not nearly as terrible as I feared it would be. And by the way ... that pesky drain is no big deal. I was afraid of that more than anything. I didn't feel it at all.

So now, it has been one year since that awful day. I am in a much better place now than I was then. I am still on Tamoxifen (and hating it), but I've made some big life changes. I completely re-designed the way I nourish my body, and I've lost 26 pounds and six pants sizes. I meditate every night and I only eat organic meats & dairy products. I still have my kooky sense of humor (even cancer can't kill that!!). I think of it this way ... when I'm an old fart in the old age home, everything else may be sagging, but I'll still have the rack of a 20-year-old!