

I was 45 years old and staring a freshly emptied nest squarely in the face. I was excited to pare down, unleash myself, have a few adventures, and so I moved myself into a smaller place to get the ball rolling. I thought I pulled a chest muscle in the move. I made the classic hand to sore muscle rub move and found a very distinct lump. I remember the pause, the quick uh-oh, and then the sinking, quiet knowing that settled in. It was Thanksgiving week, and after the doctor visit (it could be a cyst, let's not worry yet), the sonogram, and the biopsy, I got the call December 2, 2011. I had been experiencing an instinctual knowing that it was cancer, but still found it surreal to hear the confirmation.

I can only describe what happened next as the slowest (often excruciatingly slow) whirlwind of appointments, treatment opinions, unsolicited advice, and horrifying Google searches that I have ever experienced. I can only imagine how loudly I was telegraphing that deer in the headlights feeling, but it was loud enough for a nurse to suggest contacting **Linked By Pink**.

If you look up the word "supportive" in the search engine of your phone (do I even still *have* a dictionary?) it is defined simply as, "providing encouragement or emotional help". But, if you scroll beyond the definition, you come to an impressive list of synonyms: helpful, beneficent, hopeful, reassuring, caring, comforting, commiserating, compassionate, sympathizing, kind, and understanding are just a few. The women I encountered in **Linked By Pink** exemplified every word in that list of synonyms and more. The knowledge gained through shared experience holds so much more value than clinical knowledge. What I gained almost through osmosis by simply sitting quietly at a monthly meeting remains immeasurable.

I had Invasive Ductal Carcinoma, Triple Negative, Stage 3 (initially stage 2, but later categorized as 3). I underwent neoadjuvant chemotherapy (prior to surgery chemo), lumpectomy, and 36 radiation treatments. I struggled heavily over treatment options, but in the end I made the best decisions I could at the time and just kept moving forward. The decision making and moving forward part made easier with the support of other women who had gone through and/or were going through the same thing.

I am now 5 years out from that colossal skid off track. I can honestly say that it feels more like 10 years have passed. Treatment took nearly a year. The recovery from treatment took a little longer. I recall how unsettling it was to look in the mirror and see a hairless, pale, sickly looking person staring back. I remember wondering where I went. I look in the mirror today and, while that face still looks different (really? of all the hair not to return...it had to be my *eyebrows*?), I find myself finally thinking, "There you are."

I live my life determined not to invite cancer to return. I've spent the last few years transitioning to a whole-food, plant-based diet. I left a job I hated to work at a place that wholly supports the health choices I make for myself. I limit stress wherever I can. I made it through.

I did not do it alone. I had family support that truly was overwhelming. I also had the support of a wonderful group of women in **Linked By Pink**.

Thank You.

~ Patti Benoit
Erie, PA