

Just a few days after my routine annual mammogram in NOV 2015, I received a call. My results showed an “asymmetry” in the left breast. I needed to return for a repeat mammogram and sonogram. Although this sort of a call is always unnerving, I’d been through it so many times before and it was always nothing. Any fears were further reduced when the repeat screening and sonogram was scheduled more than 6 weeks later due to backlog around the holidays. Surely they would have found a way to schedule me sooner if there was any “real” concern. Right? I passed through Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years with worry only creeping in every once in a while. On JAN 5, 2016, the sonogram showed there was definitely a “mass” that was solid and not liquid-filled. This meant it was not a cyst but the doc reassured me, saying “50% of all findings end up being benign.” To know for sure, a biopsy was scheduled 8 days later.

When I met with the doctor prior to the biopsy, I asked if there was any way to get my results within 2 days because I had travel plans for a vacation in Mexico, leaving in 3 days. (This was a birthday trip to celebrate my 50th.) She told me that it was unlikely because only “stat” cases were normally processed that quickly but she would make a note of the request. 1:40PM the next day, JAN 14, 2016, I was in my car when the call came in. I saw the Breast Imaging Center ID on the screen in my dash. Did you feel time stop at that moment on that day? It did for me. Just 5 days before my 50th birthday, I now had more to worry about than crossing an age milestone.

Somehow I managed to remain calm and ask questions, at least while I was on the call. I was diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma. The tumor was “very small,” 0.8cm, but the adjacent lymph node also tested positive. No prognosis could be given until additional test results came back. From that moment, everything was a blur. I decided to cancel our Mexico trip, knowing that I would not be able to “relax” and that I wanted to be here in case I could quickly secure an appointment with a surgeon. I did manage to see a surgeon only a week later – a week that felt much, much longer, spent scaring myself with Google searches. The surgeon gave me hope that things “didn’t seem too bad.” There was a cancellation so I was able to have my chosen surgery – a lumpectomy – less than 2 weeks later. We discovered that the mass was just a little larger than originally thought – 1.1cm, still considered “very small” – BUT there was involvement in 5 lymph nodes. When I had my first oncology appt. at the Regional Cancer Center, I learned that the 5th lymph node pushed me into Stage 3a. Everything else the doc said sounded muffled and far away after that. But this is where things actually started to get brighter. I had a PLAN! It didn’t sound very pleasant - 6 rounds of aggressive chemotherapy followed by 33 radiation treatments – but it was a PLAN and the doc specifically said we were “going for the cure.” I’ll take a PLAN any day over the uncertainty and glaring fear I’d been facing for the eternity of 1 month and 2 days.

Chemo and radiation both went relatively easily for me – tired but not wiped out, yucky metallic taste in my mouth but not unbearable, assorted other weird and uncomfortable

side effects. I never felt sorry for myself but still had isolated moments of abject blind fear, from which I was mercifully rescued by my tremendous support network of family and friends.

With one more chemo session to go, I decided to attend my first Linked By Pink meeting. I didn't feel strong enough to talk about all of this until then. I had to get my own head together first but decided that helping others through this journey was the best way to make something good out of it. I discovered a group of the strongest, most supportive, and just plain cool women I'd ever known! Every one of us travels the journey in a different way but only someone who has experienced it personally can really KNOW what we've all gone through. Only these women can truly say, "I understand," sharing thoughts and advice that hit home. I learn something from them at each encounter, whether it's about healthy living, coping with fear that is diminished but still ever-present, or just how to stand tall and proud as a SURVIVOR. I look in their eyes and see myself and, together, we are stronger than any one of us can be alone. I pray to remain cancer-free and thank God for my new pink sisterhood.

~ Holly English
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