

My journey began in the fall of 2014 when I had just turned 44. I had a sonogram at my yearly check-up because I had dense breast tissue, and the sonogram would give them a better picture. They found a couple of cysts but assured me they were nothing to worry about. Normally, I would've just left it at that but something told me to pursue this. My paternal grandmother died from breast cancer so they sent me to the high risk breast clinic at Hamot. I met with a surgeon and filled out a family tree. I discovered my paternal aunt had died of ovarian cancer, which qualified me for genetic testing. I had testing done in May 2015 after having genetic counseling. It came back positive for the BRCA1 gene, putting me at an extremely high risk for ovarian and breast cancer. I again met with the surgeon and was highly encouraged to have my ovaries out and to consult a plastic surgeon about possibly having a prophylactic bilateral mastectomy.

In September 2015 at the Cleveland Clinic, I had my ovaries and tubes removed. I was blessed that there were no signs of cancer, but I was instantly put into menopause. After healing from the surgery, I started on Tamoxifen.

At my 6-month check-up I consulted with a plastic surgeon about the preventative options for the chance of breast cancer. Due to a chest wall deformity she thought I would have better success at the Cleveland Clinic. I wanted to keep my breasts; however, after much thought and many discussions with family, friends and doctors, I decided the risk was too great. I wanted to be around for my family. I wanted to live. In September 2016 I had a prophylactic bilateral mastectomy. I had grafts and expanders placed at the time of surgery. I was doing great until about 12 days in. I developed a fever and was admitted back to Cleveland. I spent 5 days on IV antibiotics but ultimately had to have my right expander removed. It was a very emotional time. I just kept reminding myself how fortunate I was. In January I had my expander put back in. I am now just waiting for my exchange surgery the end of June.

I love that being a pre-survivor, I was welcomed into Linked By Pink. I found comfort in all the ladies that have gone through this and much more. Everyone had hints, tips and advice that went way beyond what a doctor's office could offer. Everyone is so open and willing to help others in any way they can. The generosity of this group, whether it be a pick-me-up card, gift card or words of encouragement, is outstanding. I admire each and every woman whose courage shines through their struggle. I love being a part of this amazing, strong, inspiring group of ladies.

~ Shelly Novak
Fairview, PA