

In June 2010, at the age of 42, I was diagnosed with HER2+ breast cancer. The four tumors in my right breast were just the beginning of a series of health issues that would affect me that year. I also began a battle with recurrent kidney stones as a result of a severe vitamin D deficiency, diabetes and I needed a thyroidectomy as a side effect of my radiation therapy.

My sons were just 5 and 8 and my daughter was 15 when I was diagnosed. After taking a break from a full-time career, spending seven years doing per diem consulting work and focusing on my young family, I was anticipating spending that summer looking for opportunities to re-enter the full-time work force. I had no idea I would be enduring four months of chemotherapy, a mastectomy, breast reconstruction and 28 daily radiation treatments.

I was fortunate to have been able to receive all of my cancer care in Erie at the Regional Cancer Center, and I cannot even begin to express the gratitude that I have for every one of my caregivers. Never before had I encountered such a group of selfless, caring professionals. Each one of them was more wonderful than I could have ever imagined.

From the time of my initial diagnosis I was encouraged to join **Linked By Pink**. I'm embarrassed to admit that it took a lot of encouraging. I was in a failing marriage and I was scared to death about the potential of losing my battle with cancer and how that would affect my family and young children. I certainly didn't want to start socializing with a group of young women who were dying of cancer.

This ridiculous idea that I had of what **Linked By Pink** was immediately disappeared when I met **Linked By Pink** founders Norma Zimmer and Heather Stempka at Wegman's Café on a brisk fall day in 2010. These women certainly weren't dying. They were young, fun and full of life and optimism. They had been where I currently was and they were doing far more than just surviving. They were thriving and using their personal experience to give back to others. While I have experienced the heartache of losing dear friends to this cruel disease, I've also had the opportunity to live, love, laugh and embrace life with the spectacular women I've met as a member of **Linked By Pink**.

I've reached my five-year, cancer-free milestone and I am looking forward celebrating many more significant milestones. I've gone on to become a certified breast cancer help line volunteer with a national breast cancer organization. I'm constantly humbled by the number of phone calls, texts and more that I receive from friends and family asking me to reach out and connect with people they know and love who are fighting cancer and need the support of someone who has been there.

Embracing my journey with cancer and using my experience to help someone else along their journey has given me the courage to move forward and take care of myself also. My children are now 12, 15 and 21 and they are thriving. I have begun an extremely fulfilling full-time career with UPMC Hamot in the Medical Staff Office. I'm in a loving, committed relationship with a wonderful man and I hope to call his daughters my step-children in time.

Christopher Reeve once said, "With hope, all things are possible." I like to think that I'm a living testament to that notion, and I cannot think of a better way to live than to give to others that same sense of hope ignited in me by **Linked By Pink**.

~ Lori Engott-Spaulling
Millcreek, PA