

“You have breast cancer”. Words no woman wants to hear. I received that dreaded news over the phone, while rushing through Orlando’s airport, after taking a cruise with my husband and our 3 teen-aged children. My heart sank. I nodded in the affirmative to my husband, who dropped his head and shut his eyes. He had been with me at my biopsy, so he knew what I was referring to without even saying a word. We went from Orlando, to Boston’s airport, and then back to Buffalo airport, then a long 3-hour drive home, in silence. I shed a couple silent tears, but couldn’t say anything, because I didn’t want the kids’ last memories of our cruise to be bad ones.

My husband and I went to Cleveland Clinic for a 2<sup>nd</sup> opinion the following week. Their care and compassion were phenomenal, so we decided that day to have all my cancer care handled there. I opted for a double mastectomy, because I didn’t want to get this news twice. Leaving my “good breast” would still leave me an 18-20% chance of having the cancer spread to that side, so for me it was a no-brainer. The surgery was successful, and I was diagnosed with Invasive Lobular Carcinoma, not the most common type of breast cancer, but certainly a beatable one. Then I started my chemotherapy. I didn’t want the cancer to have control over every aspect of my body, so I had my long, blonde hair shaved off and it felt very liberating!! I had beaten cancer to the punch. I took my hair off!! After chemo, I started radiation. I’ll admit, I wasn’t prepared for all of the side-effects of the chemo and radiation: watching my fingernails turn black, then fall off, only to re-grow and do it all over again, having my range of motion effected by the “cooking” of my shoulder and chest muscles from the radiation. I began to wonder if everything I was going through was normal. Then a friend suggested I look into a support group called “Linked by Pink”, so I did.

I’m so glad I took the first step and attended one of their meetings. The women there had all been through breast cancer and totally related to what I was going through. Some had the same type of cancer and had the same kind of chemotherapy regimen, so they knew about the fingernail issues, and all of them who had undergone radiation could relate to the range of motion problems, as well as the lymphedema problems. These women were such a blessing!! It felt so reassuring to be in the company of “women who understood”. I had researched and read many articles on-line, and that was helpful, but actually being part of a group such as Linked by Pink, was just amazing!!

I’ve had many set-backs and surprises in 2014, my year started with the double-mastectomy on January 27<sup>th</sup>, and it ended with kidney failure in November 2014, with a total hysterectomy nestled between the two. I’ve remained positive and optimistic throughout my ordeal, because I truly believe that everything happens for a reason. We may not know the reason now, but eventually we will. Perhaps it is just to teach us how fragile life is, or perhaps it is to allow us to help others we encounter along our life’s journey, who are going through the same thing. . . but eventually we will understand why we had to travel down this unpleasant path. The group of women at Linked by Pink are already a testament to how getting this diagnosis can help you help others. I’m so thankful they allowed me to become part of their group.