

Each year over 26,000 women under the age of 45 are diagnosed with breast cancer. In October of 2007, I was one of those women.

I am the oldest of 4 children. Prior to my diagnosis, three others in my family had been diagnosed with different types of cancer. My younger brother, Don sadly passed at the age of 35 after a 10 year battle with brain cancer.

I was a 42 year old stay at home mom to our three boys. I was getting ready one morning, adjusted my bra and felt a small hard lump about the size of a marble. My doctor got me in the next day and sent me down for a mammogram (even though I had just had a clean one in July). They could not see anything on the mammo so they did an ultrasound and it was there that they could see that the lump was solid and that I would need to have a biopsy done. Even when we returned to get results, I truly thought it was just a fibroid. I was sure all my cancer "dues" had been paid by my family members. Besides, we don't have a family history of breast cancer. Isn't that what they always say...the biggest worry about breast cancer was if you had a family history?

When you hear the word "cancer", you automatically think it is a death sentence. Just as most parents who have faced a life threatening challenge, my first thoughts were of my children. They were in 11th, 9th and 6th grade at the time. I distinctly remember how afraid and sad I was that I may not get to see even my oldest son graduate from high school.

It was then a whirlwind of setting up appointments. There were so many decisions to be made. Sadly, in the midst of all of this my father-in-law was getting ready to pass away. On the Friday after I was diagnosed, my husband was making funeral arrangements for his father. His strength through all of this still amazes me. I found myself sitting at the cancer center at 7:30 am on Wednesday having a PET scan and running home to change and go to a funeral. How quickly life can be turned upside down.

From all the testing it was determined that I was stage 1. I had a lumpectomy and they removed it all. I knew since I had chosen to have a lumpectomy instead of mastectomy I had to have radiation as well. First thing to do would be chemo. Then came the daily visits to the cancer center for 5 weeks of radiation.

From day one I tried to reach out to anyone who would let me know what it was like to go through this. To let me know that I could make it to the other side of this. I attended support group meetings at the cancer center. I was so young compared to the others there, most of whom were retired. Even though we were going through the same thing I had things I was dealing with that these

ladies were not. How could I talk to my sixth grader about this? How can I take care of my kids while going through treatment?

It was at this time that I met an incredible group of about 20 women from across the country in an online support group who were all going through chemo at the same time. We came to be known as the January Jewels as that was when we started chemo. I don't think I could have made it through my treatment without these wonderful women. My support.

I had my mom and dad and my husband and family. I had friends who stepped in and even people I didn't even know that well offer help. I was lucky. Not everyone is. There is something inherently different about talking to another breast cancer survivor... I knew if I made it to the other side of my treatments I would do what I could to help other women on their journey.

A year after my radiation ended I became a Reach to Recovery volunteer with the American Cancer Society which is a program that matches up women one on one with those who are newly diagnosed and I proudly helped create Linked By Pink.

In March of 2008, our founder, Heather Stempka, had an article in the cancer center's newsletter asking women to share their story in a calendar. There were nine of us who did. The calendars all featured young women from our area who were diagnosed under the age of 45. Since then I have volunteered pretty much full time; first growing (with Heather) and now running Linked By Pink. It has definitely been a labor of love. Becky Maxson and many others have helped us grow and expand the help we are able to give. We have been able to provide over \$200, 000 in direct financial assistance to many patients and their families' and organizations that help those women right here in our community. In addition the emotional support is incredible!

I have learned something from every single survivor I have talked to. From every single woman who has come to a meeting. Each story is different and each is important. These women are caring and strong. These are women who are willing to comfort and support their "sisters" who are dealing with the very disease they have been diagnosed with. How courageous and amazing is that?!

By the way, I did get to see all of my boys graduate from high school and soon even the youngest, from college! I feel that giving back through Linked By Pink is my thanks to the universe and to God for getting me through this.

~Norma Zimmer
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