

Why me? What had I done to deserve this? How will my children remember me? Who will wrap their Christmas gifts and take them to look at holiday lights? What will they tell my Grandkids when they ask “Why isn’t Gaga here?” These are questions I asked myself from day one. My answer would come much later....

I come from a family of ten kids. Seven girls, three boys.

In 1973, my 17 year old sister Diane, a senior in High School died of leukemia within a week of her diagnosis. I was 9. I learned years later that leukemia was cancer of the blood. It was like a bad dream. Our house was full of people. Why were they all here? Why was everybody crying? Where was my sister? All questions....

My oldest brother, Joe, died in 1995 of MS. He’d battled the disease for many years. He had two small children. Why him? What was MS? Who was going to raise my niece and nephew? More questions...

We lost another sister, this time to Colon cancer. She fought the battle for a few years, news teetering from ok to not so good, back to so-so. A roller coaster ride until her death in 2006.

I was diagnosed in 2009. I elected for a lumpectomy, which was followed by chemotherapy and radiation. By June 2010, I was on the road to recovery and now labeled a ‘survivor’. I still pondered a lot of the same questions but somehow pushed those questions aside and forged ahead with a new goal.....to continue to fight this dreadful disease and not let it consume my every waking moment. My first memory of LBP was my first day of chemo. I had a visit from a young woman, Sandy Ruscitto Jordano. She was so kind. She didn’t even know me, and yet, she made me feel like I had been her friend forever! She introduced me to Linked By Pink. I remember thinking ‘Wow, there are others like me?’ – Shortly thereafter, I attended my first LBP group meeting. I remember being so nervous. It didn’t take long for me to fit right in. I realized I wasn’t the only one with so many questions and I began to realize I wasn’t alone on my journey. How these strangers quickly became my LBP sisters. The bond was one I had never felt before, and one I would never forget.

In 2011, my brother Mark was diagnosed with Pancreatic cancer. When he reached the point when they could no longer help him, he chose no treatment. He chose to live (and I mean LIVE) until his passing in February 2015. He embraced life so vibrantly during his 3 ½ year illness that it was then that I was beginning to understand some of the why’s! I spent as much time as I could with Mark during this time and boy, did he give cancer a run for it’s money. Cancer can do so many things, but it was the things it didn’t do to Mark that made him my hero. It didn’t break his spirit. He started each and every day with a new agenda. Cancer wasn’t going to take away the things he enjoyed most in this world, his family, his livelihood, the simple things in life. He had many friends and

did all he could to get out and LIVE! We formed a group, 'Team Tupek' and he was our inspiration. He led the effort to raise money for Pancreatic Cancer (aka Pan Can) and was the guest speaker at Purple Stride in Pittsburgh in 2014. He never gave up the fight!

Another diagnosis came in 2012, my sister Yvonne. Breast Cancer. The questions flooded back. Why us? Why was this happening to our family? When would this end?

2014 – another sister, Chris, VHL Syndrome (Von Hippel Landau), tumors in the brain. She is currently still battling. Another fighter!

And most recently, my sister, Mary Ann, diagnosed with Breast Cancer in the Fall of this year. She is now cancer free and is also a survivor. I'm starting to figure there is safety in numbers!

By now there were so many questions, I gave up looking for answers and now just take comfort in the fact that everything happens for a reason and I live every day as though it could be my last. I will turn 54 years young on the 26th of this month and I embrace every year.

Of the seven girls, we lost 2 and 4 of us continue to fight every day. As we all continue this bond of survivorship together, I always remember those things that got me through. My Linked by Pink sisters. My family. My friends. My attitude that I wasn't going to let Cancer beat me.

In 2016, a very close cousin was diagnosed with Uterine cancer. I accompanied her to appointments, sat with her during her chemo treatments and made sure I was there every step of the way with her.

There was my answer! I knew what to do for her because of my experience! I knew HOW she felt about chemotherapy side effects and was able to help her through some pretty dark days.

Today, I don't worry as much about the questions. In the words of my brother Mark, 'It is what it is'. Such powerful meaning with such few words.

I know this story was supposed to be about me but I know, without the journeys of my brothers and sisters, I would not be who I am today, a Brave Survivor.

~ Colleen Jennings
Erie, PA