

I am pleased to say I am a 19 year breast cancer survivor. I found a lump doing a self exam in the shower and went to my ObGyn to have it looked at. My doctors office never calls with test results so when they called and said the doctor wanted to see me the very next day I knew it was not going to be good news. This was in October of 1989. The next couple of weeks were a whirl of fact finding. I got 3 different opinions. Most frustrating at this time was the amount of time it took to get appointments. Stanford was a 3 month wait! We are talking cancer here folks and time was not on my side. Fortunately I had an uncle, Dr. Rytand, who was a cardiac doctor on staff at Stanford. He pulled a few strings and got me in the next week. I was assured that the care offered in Fresno was as good as I could get at Stanford, without the 3 hour drive.

I was offered to go into a study at that time. I often feel guilty about not doing that, but I had three small children at home (4yr old twins and a 9yr old daughter) and was more concerned about being there to see them grow up.

My treatment options at the time were a mastectomy and possibly radiation or a lumpectomy and chemotherapy. I did not want to do chemotherapy so I chose the mastectomy. Once the surgery was done and the lab results were in, I had chemotherapy anyway!! Seems I had lymph node involvement in my milk ducts. Looking back on it now, I remember some milk leaking from my breasts on occasion but I just ignored it. **DO NOT IGNORE ANY SIGNS!**

I then underwent 6 months of chemotherapy that was followed by breast reconstruction. The chemotherapy was hard, especially the third month. I seemed the weakest at that point. But you just took it one day at a time. I lost all of my hair on my body. Bright side was I did not have to shave anywhere. I did have these stupid little wisps of hair on my head that I should have just shaved off, but it was not as cool back then to be bald, I wore these little terry cloth turbans all of the time. I did get a wig, but did not wear it very often. I remember going to my 20 year high school reunion that summer and they were giving an award for the person who had lost the most hair since high school, but I was not brave enough to take my wig off.

After my last dose of chemo I took the pills that were left and my friend took a picture of me flushing the rest of the drugs down the toilet. (Now it seems you should not do that for fear of contaminating the drinking water, but no such warnings were in place at that time).

Going through chemo with three little kids was very hard. My husband was a huge help when he was home, He is a firefighter and was gone 48 hours and up at the time. We had many friends who helped with the kids when they could. I tried to make life as normal for them as I could. Mom already looked scary with no hair. I remember my son Matthew, who was 4 at the time, saying I did not really have eyes in the back of my head, I always told him the reason I knew he was up to something was because I had eyes in the back of my head! Fortunately a 4 year old also believed the story that my eyes would grow back when my hair grew back!

One of the most interesting things that I learned during breast cancer treatments is which of your friends have strength in the face of adversity and which do not. I had a really close friend, one who had lived with us awhile to help her out, who vanished at this time. Another, whom I had considered not particularly close at the time, stepped up and took my children for several outings and her mother made me a bear! She is now my boss at work! You just never know who will step up to the plate. It has taught me to always contact anyone going through a crisis, whether I am uncomfortable or not, because just being there is what counts.

I never wanted to join a support group as I did not want to hear stories from people whose cancer had come back in another area. One day my doctor, Dr. Perkins, asked me to have lunch with one of his other patients that was down in the dumps. I agreed to this and we had a very nice lunch, but what the doctor did not tell me was that her cancer had metastasized to her bones in her back. I was very upset after that lunch and about 3 months later I saw her name in the obituaries. I am a little paranoid about any pains I have that stay for any length of time, but I have excellent health insurance so I have the opportunity to have these fears laid to rest.

I was not happy with my reconstruction and so when they passed the Breast Cancer Act that basically states all women have the right to be symmetrical, I went to another plastic surgeon and had a Tram-Flap surgery done. I love the results even though I still think I look like a patchwork quilt. My husband has always been very supportive and does not even notice the scars.

My best advice to anyone facing cancer is to: 1) Get 3 opinions at least 2) Don't be afraid to ask for help 3) Keep active so you do not have time to dwell on what is happening to you 4) most importantly, keep life as normal as possible.

I am proud to say I just had my 56th birthday and am thankful for every year I have had. I am now a Grandmother of Mason, who just turned 1. My husband and I are looking forward to retirement and travel. Life could not be better! The same is in your future if you pay attention to your body.

I hope something in this letter touches at least one person facing breast cancer.

Sincerely,  
Shielah Mosely