

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 10-30-31) , ©2005

The day before Halloween is a fitting time to talk about something quite scary. October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. As a seven-year survivor I hope to share some encouragement with you. If you or a loved one is facing the diagnosis of any kind of cancer the American Cancer Society is an abundant resource for researched, non-biased information and free services. If you have Internet access you can visit the American Cancer Society site at www.cancer.org. The toll free number is 1-800-ACS-2345 (1-800-227-2345). I visited the website and called the toll free number within a day of receiving my diagnosis and in two days I received several free booklets answering my numerous questions and giving tips on how to cope with chemotherapy and radiation.

I found my tumor by doing a monthly breast self-exam (BSE). Regardless of what the media says keep on doing your own BSE on a regular basis. (Once a month when you pay your bills is a good way to remember.) If you're at risk for breast cancer consult your doctor about regular mammograms. If you can't afford a mammogram the American Cancer Society provides free mammograms.

My tumor was aggressive requiring quick action. I now have a "state-of-the-art" body. I had a double mastectomy with lymph node removal on the right side followed by TRAM Flap reconstruction. Next came six months of chemotherapy administered by the incredible staff at the offices of doctors Reimer, Johnson and Murphy. I can never say enough good things about the staff, nurses and doctors at that office. I know there are equally caring doctors at numerous oncology offices everywhere.

I took Tamoxifen for nearly three years and received the feared diagnosis of a recurrence (CORRECT SPELLING). Luckily for me it was a very tiny tumor. This time it was radiation treatments for several weeks. I was gently escorted through the whole process by the very caring staff at the office of Dr. Springate. I had to journey to Swedish in Edmonds for three days of the treatment. But now there's a new Radiation Care Facility at Harrison Hospital and others don't have to travel out of the county for treatment.

I take Arimidex every day to help prevent any recurrence (CORRECT SPELLING). My chances of surviving for twenty or more years are very good and I plan to be here into my eighties at least. Every minute of every day is an awesome gift. I'll never look at life in the same way I did before December 22, 1995.

I still sometimes "sweat the small stuff." I knew I had returned to the world of everyday living about two years into my cancer survivor journey. I had been traveling through life in a Zen-like state and felt quite calm and serene. Well, that quickly changed when a humongous slug slid its slimy way across my garden munching as it went. I sliced the offending creature in half with a very sharp garden knife. Then I quickly felt regret and thought, "Back to the serenity." But a few weeks later someone drove very aggressively into my path and I was very tempted to salute them. I had to laugh because I realized I was entirely back to normal living.

The point I'm making is the media loves the topic of breast cancer especially. But there are also literally hundreds of thousands of people who have all kinds of cancers and they have been or are in the process of facing the prospect of death up close and personal. Nearly every day a new method is discovered to help deter this dread disease. I believe with all my heart and soul that maybe not in my lifetime but in the lifetime of my grandchildren there will be a cure for cancer. For every person diagnosed I can introduce you to twenty or thirty survivors of the same disease. We all take our strength and courage from those who have gone before us and those who are still surviving.

I'll end today with a poem by my dear friend Joanie Guggenmos (two time breast cancer survivor) from June Cotner's book "Get Well Wishes." The poem is called "So Very Blessed." "Cancer is such a weird thing.../it has taught me each day is a gift/that cannot be taken for granted./We feel so lucky, so fortunate, and so very blessed./We live each day and love each moment."

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