

I am Debra Haney and on November 30, I will celebrate being cancer free for twelve years.

As a little girl, I seemed to get the more unusual childhood diseases – like the fifth disease and viruses that seemed to have no name. My mother has always said that if it was something no one had heard of, I would get it! Well... it looks like I haven't outgrown that trend of getting something different!

My breast cancer journey:

- During late September 2004, I noticed a place on the nipple of my right breast. It appeared as if I had skinned it. When it didn't clear up after a week, I made an appointment with my gynecologist. I was placed on antibiotics for 7 days and strongly told that if it did not clear up that I had to return to see him. The problem did not go away and I was scheduled to see a surgeon. My mammogram from April 2004 was reviewed and nothing was out of the ordinary. I had surgery in the surgeon's office on November 2 to remove the place, originally diagnosed as an adenoma.
- I had a follow-up appointment on November 10 to remove the stitches. I called several times before this follow-up to learn the lab results. They were never back. My surgeon told me that I had Paget's disease. He was surprised with this diagnosis as he had believed it was an adenoma.
- I was diagnosed with Paget's disease of the breast. Paget's disease of the breast is a rare form of breast cancer, and accounts for less than 5 percent of all breast cancers. Paget's disease of the breast starts in the breast ducts and extends to the skin of the nipple and to the dark circle of skin (areola) around the nipple. It's easy to mistake the signs and symptoms for skin irritation (dermatitis) or another noncancerous (benign) skin condition of the nipple just like I did.
- I was told that there would be one of two courses – an excision of the nipple and areola with radiation or a mastectomy. A new mammogram of the right breast would make the decision. The mammogram showed some calcifications, so the choice was reduced to mastectomy with reconstructive surgery.
- After meeting with a plastic surgeon, I chose to have a TRAM flap for my reconstruction.
- My surgery revealed that not only did I have Paget's disease, but I also had a 2.2 cm tumor behind my nipple. This had not shown up on my mammogram in April or in October. In January 2005, I started chemotherapy because 25% of the tumor was invasive, but thankfully I had no lymph node involvement. I was scheduled for 8 treatments, one every 3 weeks. In late February I learned I would only have to have 4 treatments because my oncologist had attended a breast cancer seminar and learned that patients with similar pathology reports as mine did just as well with only 4 treatments instead of the usual 8.
- I finished my chemo on Maundy Thursday in 2005. I did well enough that day that I was able to attend church services and see a re-creation of Da Vinci's, "The Last Supper." What a way to celebrate my last day of chemo.

I don't know why I had breast cancer – no family history, good health, did all the right things – self-exams, mammograms, doctor visits – but I do know that as always God takes the bad and turns them into good. I have grown emotionally and spiritually through this journey. I am much more compassionate than I was 11 years ago. Things that I thought were so important to me are now just blips on a radar screen. I value family, friends, and life much more than I ever did before. In some ways I am more patient, yet at the same time impatient with trivial things. Events that once would stress me to the max are now non-events. Why? Because today I can say "If I made it through this (being breast cancer) I can make it through anything."