

Kathy Thornton

In January of 2014 I found a lump in my left breast. Thankfully, I had recently made the decision to go on a diet with my son which I think helped me feel the lump when I did! I think that was God's way of letting me find my breast cancer. I tried not to be too worried about the lump because I have had several over my life that all turned out to be cysts so I assumed this one would be the same. I even postponed my appointment for the month of January with my gynecologist, which was dumb of me.

When I finally went in February, he said he was unsure that I needed a mammogram but I had already found another lump close to my lymph nodes. I began to worry more as the appointment got closer. In March, I went for my mammogram and was told they were 100% sure I had breast cancer. Although I was nervous, I never expected them to tell me that. I was alone at the appointment, almost in tears and scared to death. All I could think about was my husband and kids. I was scared I would not get to see my boys get married and have kids of their own. I was worried how to tell them. It seemed as though my phone just started ringing off the hook with calls from my oldest son Zane. I tried to talk to him without sounding upset and kept the calls short. He knew something was wrong but I was not ready to tell him just yet. Before telling my sons, I wanted to talk to my husband, Brad, first. While talking to my husband, Zane called and I told him what the doctor said. Just like my husband, he tried to reassure me that I was going to be fine.

I had a follow up with the doctor on Thursday of that week. The next two days passed so slowly! Because I could hardly eat or concentrate due to the fear, my family and friends tried to get me into the doctor earlier. The following day, I left work early and spent the day with my

youngest son, Tyson. He was just as strong and brave as his brother and dad. That same day, I also called the church that I go to and asked to meet with the pastor. During this time, I had several church members pray with me to give me healing and also to give my sons and husband the strength they needed to see me through this ordeal. The prayers and support I received at the time were just what I needed. I was still very nervous about my appointment with the surgeon the next day, but I felt better.

The next day, the doctor saw me earlier than expected with my husband, mother, and sister by my side. My dad sent prayers from work that day. After seeing my surgeon, although he could not promise me what was going to happen, I felt like I had a plan. I am a plan A and Plan B kind of person so I felt much better just knowing what was going to happen and that took away some of the unknown. My husband and family were great and so supportive about what I was told would be happening to me. My sons were absolutely wonderful. They were so strong and never doubted my ability to get through this! My oldest son told me “You know what you have to do so go do it and get it done.” My youngest said “You are young and you have this!” We never spoke really that much about it after that. That made such a difference to me. My boys did not treat me any different and made me feel like everything would be ok. Everyone was so supportive and wonderful throughout this process!

My surgery was scheduled for two weeks away and of course, my nerves were out of control. The end result was the removal of my left breast, along with all of my lymph nodes on that side but I recovered remarkably well. I had my follow-up appointment one week later and was told it was stage 2D and that the cancer was in 6 of my lymph nodes. My surgeon made me feel comfortable while telling me about my chemo and radiation treatment plan. Once again, I felt better just knowing what was going to happen, but of course, now my brain worried day and

night! I followed up with a visit to my oncologist. My diagnosis was then changed to Stage 3A and one of my lymph nodes had cracked open. He also confirmed that I would have to have chemo and radiation, but to bear with him and I would see the light at the end of the tunnel. I tried really hard to keep a good attitude, but won't deny, I had a few pity party moments where I thought I was the only person in the world who had breast cancer. I felt upset and felt alone although I had all of the love in the world. It's really hard to explain, but I think it's sort of an acceptance period.

My first chemo treatment ending up not being that bad. I was told to expect sickness and hair loss but I remained positive and said, "Maybe not". I remember seeing a lady there who had lost her hair and it terrified me! They were right though, in one and a half weeks I lost my hair. That was the hardest thing I had to deal with. Although I was never a vain person, it really upset me. I never liked to look at myself like that; it was almost like I didn't recognize my reflection. Once my husband saw me without my hair, I felt his acceptance and I was okay but I never let my sons see me without hair because I thought it would scare them. Looking back now, this was probably silly of me to think! I finally got over it because I was alive. It just took an adjustment period.

Although I only got sick once during my chemo treatments, I felt very fortunate to be finished! When I made it to the last three treatments, just like my doctor said, I saw the light at the end of the tunnel. The last treatments made my legs hurt terribly but I muddled through. I remember my youngest son had just gotten into Georgia Tech as a transfer student and I did not want to miss the orientation! When the time for radiation came around, it scared me to death. I don't really know what I expected, but the staff and doctors were wonderful. The treatments made me a little tired towards the end, but I managed to work every day!

In the past two years, I have had several procedures including breast reconstruction, which will be completed by the end of the year. At first, I was on the fence about this procedure because I felt that maybe I should be grateful for being alive and should not try to rebuild my breast. When I finally decided to have the reconstruction surgery, it lasted 7 and ½ hours. It was the most difficult procedure I have had done to date! After three days, I began to feel better. In addition to the reconstruction, I made the choice to have a complete hysterectomy, to ensure I do not get ovarian cancer.

Since I was diagnosed with breast cancer at the young age of 45, I decided to have genetic testing done at the time of my mammogram in September of 2015. Within a month, I was told that I tested positive for a gene that would likely cause me to have breast cancer that would in my remaining breast. I acted quickly and scheduled to have the breast removed by the end of the year. Sure enough, the cells were already lined up to eventually form cancer. Fortunately, I had my implant for that breast completed at the same time. Due to that gene, I need to have a colon check every five years and my skin checked annually. Everything else that the gene could affect has already been removed. I did tell my children about the gene; but I haven't told my youngest yet. I have decided to wait until he finishes Georgia Tech this semester so he doesn't worry. My oldest son knows what to watch out for. I try to stay very proactive with mine and my family's health maintenance!

After having my port removed, I now go to my oncologist every three months. The PET scans and the mammograms, although needed and appreciated, are still terrible on my nerves. I was told once at an appointment by one of my oncologist that, "I needed to start living like a survivor." I do my best, but it's hard sometimes. Since being diagnosed, I have seen many people

who have cancer (some friends and family). I never understood how many people cancer affected until I saw it firsthand.

As of March 2016, I am two years cancer free! I have been blessed with amazing medical care and I plan to stay cancer free. Now I can look back on this time in my life and realize that I did have a few things taken away from me, but I also gained certain things! I tell my family I love them every opportunity I get. I think it drives my sons and my husband crazy sometimes! I play in the waves when I go to the beach instead of merely watching from the sand. I appreciate those special moments that are taken for granted, and I know God watches over me. I thank him for giving me, and my family, the strength needed to stay on the right course. I look back on this time and remember talking with my sister about my cancer shortly after my first surgery. She told me she didn't see how I was getting through all of this and I told her, "You just have to. You never really know your own courage and strength until it is tested."