

Don't ignore your body, listen to it and take it to a doctor

My name is Gay Lemmons. I'm very proud of the Lemmons name because I was born and raised on the Lemmons family farm in southeast Missouri. I am a mother of four, a sister, an aunt, and a Gigi - my grandchildren named me Gigi. I am a salesperson and hope I'm a good friend.

I am a breast cancer survivor. I will be 13 years a survivor on May 5th. The cancer was discovered through a routine mammogram. My mother was a breast cancer survivor and so every year I have mammogram and always have since I was 40.

There was a little spot at the very edge of one of the shots. Through the watchful eye of Dr. Daniel Coonce at Premier Diagnostics he noticed that it had not been there the year before. He started comparing films and felt like I needed to have a biopsy. I had a hook wire biopsy and it was positive - Invasive Ductile Carcinoma, Stage 1.

I had the hook wire biopsy here and eventually had a lumpectomy at Vanderbilt. My chemo was at Tennessee Oncology at Summit Hospital in Hermitage, where I had six rounds of chemo that were Taxotere and Carboplatin. I also had 12 rounds of what was then a new drug called Herceptin that they had just starting using for patients with early diagnoses. After that there were 35 rounds of radiation in Cookeville. Every three weeks I had a chemo treatment. After those treatments I had six more Herceptin treatments at the same time I had radiation. I had a bald head. And I tell people I embraced my baldness and just went right on. I got some great looking scarves during that time and even some false eyelashes.

There were no nurse navigators here in Cookeville when I was going through treatment. I'm proud of the work Komen has done here for this reason. After a pretty long discussion with the then CEO of the hospital Mr. Mattingly, he realized how important it was for women to have someone to navigate them through the process. I was grateful to have a friend help me through it. My friend, Eileen Stuber, had been through the same process a year earlier. I leaned heavily on her.

I read everything I could get my hands on. My favorite book was Breast Cancer for Dummies. It is just exactly like the yellow and black book Computers for Dummies. It had so much information in it for a lay person like me. I had to put it down often, because you can get an overload, but I wanted to be informed. That's the book I consulted to find out what I could to know what was going on. When I didn't understand something, I didn't care how silly the question seemed, I asked. That's one of my key words of advice to anyone. Doctors have incredible training and are highly intelligent. I understand that. But I am the patient. I am the consumer. And when you don't understand something that has to do with your life, and your wellbeing, then you need to ask questions until you understand what you need to understand.

Dr. Eric Raefsky was my oncologist. He was wonderful. He would come in and draw on a chalk board. He would put everything on the chalkboard, ask what I was experiencing, and

explain each step when I had questions. The women that worked at Summit and took care of me were wonderful. There's such a special place for those sweet women who take care of you during chemo treatments. Wonderful.

Things have changed for the better in Cookeville. And I've been very proud of the things that the hospital is doing. First thing they did was hire Erin Young who's our nurse navigator. I've heard so many people say how important she was in their lives. We have surgeons who understand that breast cancer is just a little bit different. I know that they are improving and enhancing their treatments. Things have changed. It's amazing to me how things have changed for women. And how much has happened in terms of new drugs and better ways to do things.

One of the main reasons I went to Vanderbilt is because of a very close friend whose wife had been diagnosed with breast cancer three years before I was. The first thing we did was to call and say "What do we do?" Through their experiences he told us the best doctors to use that they trusted. It's important. Call around, it's your Life. Everybody has to make decisions that are good for them. You need to be comfortable with your decisions. I felt comfortable with my treatment decisions.

It's very important to stay as active as you can during and after treatment process. I walked some. I wasn't as active as I needed to be. That is what's wonderful about the ABC program that Komen has helped to provide at the YMCA here in Cookeville. There are so many things that are available to do. They go through a pink ribbon training with the After Breast Cancer program and set up an exercise program for women going through treatment. That is something I encourage women going through chemo to do. There are some days that you don't feel like getting off the couch, at least that true was for me. Everyone's different, but getting as much activity as you can possibly take is what you need to do.

I believe my focus on healing greatly contributed to my treatment's success. I've always felt like I have a positive mental attitude. I focused on healing and staying positive. And being thankful every day for every day. It was quite an experience, a good experience for me. There are positive things about it. I'd rather look at the glass as half full than half empty. That's always been my attitude and certainly has been since breast cancer.

I searched for good information. I chose a perfect team for treatment. I had a wonderful, very early diagnosis, which a lot of doctors could have never seen because it was so small, so obscure and very deep in my breast tissue. I had good people taking care of me.

If had to tell you in a nutshell the things that got me through it, the first and foremost would be my faith. It's imperative that people understand how important it is to rely on a higher being; to rely on a greater strength than you can come up with by yourself. And I am a very strong believer in that. I had a different attitude about that. I have a closer walk after my diagnosis. It's how I got through it. And I think it's one of the reasons that I am being used to help so many other people. That's a wonderful part of my life - to know that my experience is helping other women. It's something I'm very thankful for.

My family would be the second thing. I have four children that just mean the world to me. They have all been so wonderful. In fact, they all went to treatment with me. There were some that couldn't handle watching me in treatment, but they were so supportive. It was wonderful to have them there. I have an incredible battery of friends that supported me throughout my journey. And that's pretty much what got me through it.

If I had not been diagnosed early and treated quickly I would have missed sunsets, the joy of watching baby bluebirds first flights in my garden, the taste of blackberry jelly, my granddaughter Aubrey's dance recitals, watching Evan & Gavin, my two older grandsons, play football in the front yard and laugh. I would have missed seeing the youngest, Graham, born on Christmas Day. I would have missed watching my children and really enjoying my children as adults.

Listen to your body. Do not ignore your body. You know your body better than anyone. Sure a doctor can take care of it better than you can if you tell them what's wrong, but you know your body better than anyone. When you see or feel something that's not exactly right. Don't ignore it. And don't feel like a hypochondriac because you need to be concerned. You are your best friend or your worst enemy. So, don't ignore your body, listen to it and take it to a doctor. You have got to know your options, and you've got to do the best thing for yourself. And that's the key - early detection is the way to survival.

The first thing I tell people that tell me they that have been diagnosed is, "You are a Survivor. From the moment you were diagnosed you are a Survivor." That's empowering. Breast cancer research has improved. We are ensuring quality care with every mammogram that Komen has helped provide in this 14 county Upper Cumberland region. Komen has spent millions of dollars in research that is energizing science to find a cure. Many different kinds of cancer have similar traits. The people that are looking for cures are cooperating and sharing information and that has made us closer to finding a cure.

You know people didn't talk about it for years. When the Komen Foundation began they didn't say the words Breast Cancer. They called it the Big C. They kept it quiet. Susan begged her sister Nancy to promise to do something about this - to remove the stigma. Allow people to say the word Cancer and seek help. We still have women today that will let something go because they don't want to know what it is. Early detection is your best chance at survival. And if we can just get this across to people. There's a whole lot worse things than being diagnosed with breast cancer. It's treatable, if it's detected early. The glass is half full.