

MY STORY

I grew up in a very small town, all of my relatives lived close. I remember when I was young my mom telling me about my Great Aunt, and how she was diagnosed with breast cancer. A few years later she passed away. Fast forward several years and two of my dad's sisters were diagnosed with breast cancer. They were in there 40's. I remember doing self-breast exams at a very early age, I believe I started when I was 16. No one coerced me to. I just remember always feeling as though I would eventually "get it". As a young woman after I started seeing a gynecologist I would always ask him to send me for a mammogram, he would always say "you're too young, don't worry about it. Keep doing your self-checks". So that's what I did! Religiously, every month, in the shower.

In January 2013 I had a partial hysterectomy. I lost my monthly reminder to do self-checks, so I would do them as I thought about it, every couple of months or so. In April of 2014 I was in the shower and decided to do a self-check. I started on the left side and noticed a small knot. I proceeded to the right side, to see if the feeling was consistent. I didn't notice it on the right side so I called my husband in and had him feel it. He said I think you should have that checked out. I started thinking I'm too young. This can't be, it's probably just a fibroid or something. I'm only 35! I decided I would just keep an eye on it, and see if it changed over the next few weeks. Two weeks later my husband came home and was telling me about a friend of a coworker and how she was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer, and she was only a couple years older than me. He said "I think you should go get that knot checked out". I told my family what was going on, they all agreed I should have it checked out, just to be sure! The following Monday I scheduled an appt. at my work clinic to let the doctor there feel and see what she thought. As soon as she felt it, she said I think you should go have a mammogram and ultrasound done. I'll send over the paperwork and I'd like you to go tomorrow if possible. The next day I went in for the mammogram/ultrasound. The technician wasn't able to see it on the mammogram so I went into the next room for the ultrasound. The ultrasound tech could see it, but she kept saying "I can't trap it", she brought in another tech to look at it, the second tech said the same thing. The first tech asked if the doctor could come in. I have cancer, that's what went through my mind at that very moment. Doctors at an imaging center usually don't see patients! When he came in he had another doctor with him. Two techs and two doctors in this tiny little room! This cannot be good! He looked at the ultrasound, had me sit up and the first thing out of his mouth was, "you already know this isn't good, don't you?" I said "as soon as you and the second doctor walked in I knew it wasn't good". He urged me to have a biopsy immediately. I got an appointment with a surgeon the next day. He felt it was best to be biopsied at Mary Ellen Locher. The very next day I was there for my biopsy. Two days later I was back at the surgeon's office for the results. When he came into the room he looked like he'd been crying. He sat down and looked at me and said "I really did not see this one. I really thought this was nothing, but you have cancer". I already knew in my heart I did. But to hear those words were gut wrenching. My mom and husband sat behind me and I could hear the tears coming from both of them. I turned around and told them they needed to hold it together. I didn't want to break down and seeing them tear up was definitely going to make me! The next few weeks were a whirlwind of tests and doctors' appointments. My family was with me for every appointment, which was comforting. I had genetic testing done because of my young age, an MRI, a CT scan, a bone scan, and chest x-ray. The next meeting that I had

with my surgeon we discussed mastectomy vs. lumpectomy and what the pros and cons were of each. I immediately said I wanted the mastectomy. I had always thought that if I were to ever get breast cancer that I would want them gone! So that was the plan. Bilateral mastectomy with reconstruction. Depending on the grade maybe chemo/radiation. We thought that we had caught it early so maybe I wouldn't have to do radiation. We received the results back from my genetic testing about a week before surgery. It was no surprise to me that it came back positive. That just reaffirmed my decision to do the bilateral mastectomy.

June 18th – surgery day, I had to have dye put in my body so they could see the sentinel node to see if the cancer had spread to my lymph nodes. The surgery went very smooth, all of the doctors said I did great! I spent the next week at my mom's house. She took care of me so my husband could keep working. She took care of my kids, drove me to all of my follow-up appointments and made sure that I ate and took my medication! I don't know how I would have done it without her. A couple of days after surgery I called to get the results of the biopsy. They had found cancer in my lymph nodes, 5 out of 15. I would have to have chemo and radiation. The cancer was graded stage 3C. I was disappointed. I really felt like we had caught it early, but it wasn't early enough! We were also told that I was Her2 positive, which means that the cancer is more aggressive. This makes my treatment plan longer than we had anticipated. 14 total months of chemo and 7 weeks of radiation. I wasn't going to let this get me down though. We had our plan and I was determined!

I started chemo the end of July. Adriamycin and Cytoxan were part of my first round of therapy. Adriamycin is sometimes called "the red devil", and it's called that for a reason! This is the stuff that makes your hair fall out, can cause mouth sores, body pain, weakness, fatigue, and the list goes on. I won't lie, it was tough. A few hours after receiving the red devil I would get nauseas, I would feel weak and tired. I was lucky though, I never got mouth sores or had any vomiting, and by day 3-4 I was getting back to my normal self. After the second treatment my hair started falling out rapidly. It was messy so we decided to just go ahead and shave it off. My sister is a stylist so we went to her house, my husband, daughter, sister and brother-in-law all had a helping hand in the head shaving! I loved my hair, my pre-cancer hair, it was long and pretty. I thought I'd be devastated to lose it but, it wasn't that bad. I think just dealing with cancer in general makes you realize there are more important things in life. Hair wasn't really one of the things that mattered anymore. I was more concerned with living. I wanted to make it. I wanted to make sure my babies were raised. I wanted to spend more time with my family and do things that made me happy. I've come to realize that the small stuff I used to get so worked up over was just a waste of my precious time.

Once I started my next round of medication, Taxol, I had very little side effects. It was a breeze compared to the Adriamycin. I'm now on my last cycle of drugs, Herceptin and Pertuzamab. I don't have any side effects from these two drugs. I started radiation in January and finished in February, and had no substantial side effects.

I just met with my plastic surgeon and we are working on setting a date for my reconstruction surgery and my last date for chemo is Sept. 30th. I'm seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. I feel very blessed

to be where I am today. I'm alive, I get to spend time with my family and God willing I will have many more days ahead of me!