

Angie Thomas

In June of 2006, I felt a lump on the side of my left breast that I had never noticed before. All throughout the next day, I continued to feel this place and began to feel anxious. I was reluctant to tell anyone about this, but early the following day I decided to call my doctor, the late Jo Ann Quillian. She asked me to come in immediately to see her.

At the age of 44, I had not had a mammogram yet, but recently had a manual exam during my physical in April. After an examination, Dr. Quillian sent me immediately for a mammogram to further examine this cyst that had not been detectable in April. I called my husband, Marc, at this point to tell him what was happening. From this moment forward, I could not have asked for more support, encouragement, and love from my husband. He met me in the parking lot as I arrived for the mammogram. This was the beginning of a journey that we never imagined to make together.

After the mammogram, an ultrasound was necessary. Dr. Frank Knight came in at the end and concluded that the cyst could be benign, but he recommended that it be removed. Dr. Quillian immediately arranged an appointment with surgeon Dr. Douglas Vanderbilt. Dr. Vanderbilt was encouraging that the cyst would be benign and a date for the lumpectomy was set for as soon as possible. Two days after the surgery, I got a phone call from Dr. Vanderbilt's office that I needed to come in to see him. The receptionist would not give me any information over the phone. I did not know that at the same time, Dr. Quillian, also a close family friend, was speaking with Marc and giving him the shocking news that fast growing, stage two invasive ductile carcinoma was found.

After the initial shock and crying was over, Marc and I were on a mission: a mission for survival. Our focus was on our children, Anna and Brooks. Anna was about to begin high school and Brooks was about to begin middle school. We were at the threshold of a very important time in their lives and we wanted to do everything possible to make sure I got better and would be around for many years to come to be their mother.

The next step was to meet with my oncologist, Dr. Darrell Johnson. I cannot say enough how blessed we were to have Dr. Johnson to guide us through this journey. He spent over an hour with us and the plan of action was decided upon. As soon as possible, I would have a bilateral mastectomy and a port inserted for chemotherapy. During the surgery, if the sentinel lymph node was clear, the plastic surgeon would begin the reconstruction process. If the lymph node was not clear, reconstruction would have to be postponed and I would have radiation along with the chemotherapy.

During the two weeks before surgery, we tried to stay busy and focused. Our family and friends surrounded us with love during this time. I still get emotional seven years later when I remember how people everywhere, many that I didn't even know, prayed for me and my family. I still am amazed at the strength and love of my husband, Marc, during this time.

On July 18, 2006, I had my surgery and it lasted over 5 hours. Dr. Vanderbilt did the bilateral mastectomy and Dr. Mark Brzezienski began the reconstruction process. I am told that a huge cheer went up in the waiting room when they got the news that the sentinel lymph node was clear! I will never forget waking up to my husband's face and hearing him softly share that same news with me.

I think only other survivors who have had this same surgery can know the pain that I experienced the next 2 weeks. I had never experienced pain like this before. My mother in law, Barbara, stayed with me in the hospital for 2 terrible nights as I was nauseated and the morphine didn't touch the pain. I will never forget the horrible pain during the ride in the wheel chair to the car and the ride home; every bump and turn was excruciating. I could not lift my upper body on my own and my family took such good care of me at home. My daughter, Anna, was so good to help me wash my hair and help out around the house. Marc patiently emptied the drains and recorded the amounts. The house was like a florist; so many people sent flowers and cards! I still am overwhelmed at the love and concern that was shown to us during this trying time.

Marc and I began the routine of going to Dr. Brzezienski's office. The reconstruction process was a long, painful process that would not completely end until the next summer. Early on, it was just awful looking and I felt like a freak of nature. I cannot say enough about the care and expertise of plastic surgeon Mark Brzezienski. I am so thankful I endured this process with him. He did a beautiful job so that I could go on with my life and feel normal again.

The next step was to get ready for the school year and prepare for chemotherapy. I have been the music teacher at Graysville Elementary School in Catoosa County, GA since 1987. This would be the first August that I would not start the school year with the wonderful children at GES. My principals, Paula Crosby Wolf and Kerri Sholl, were so very understanding and supportive. My daughter, Anna, helped get my music room ready for my substitute, Debbie Cosby. Debbie, a certified teacher with a beautiful voice, was an answer to prayer!

Two days before starting chemo, I dropped Anna and Brooks off for their first day of high school and middle school. This was our plan; we wanted life to go on as normal for them. A lot of my suffering during the chemo and reconstruction process, they did not have to see.

I had long hair for many years. A dear friend and hair stylist, Allyson O'Neal, cut my ponytail so that I could donate it to Locks of Love. As my hair began to fall out, we gathered Anna and Brooks in the kitchen while Marc shaved my head. We laughed and we cried! Prior to my hair loss, Marc and his brother, Fate Lynn, both shaved their heads in my honor. I dreaded losing my hair, but we took it in stride and the humor of 3 bald heads helped!

The chemotherapy process was not fun, but I knew it was my insurance to being cancer free. I am so thankful for the care of Dr. Johnson and the nurses at COHA. On the

first day of chemo, an angel nurse, Dorothy, took Marc and I through each step in the most loving and informative way. Two other angels, Reda Perkins and Rebecca Haskins, lovingly transported me to chemo and sat with me through those long sessions and the endurance of the “red devil”, Adriamycin. There were some hard days; the best way I could describe them were “dark” days. But, there were days when I was okay and the love and care of others helped so much. I spent time on my knees praying to my loving God for strength and giving thanks that we found this cancer in time and that I was going to be okay. My First Baptist Chattanooga family and my Graysville Elementary family brought countless meals to nourish my family and me. I will never forget their generosity and loving care. I cherish the hundred plus cards that came on a daily basis to comfort me. A dear friend, Jerry Bowman, came with dedication once a week to take me to lunch and get me out of the house. His wife, Nancy, lovingly knitted me beautiful caps for my bald head and Jerry crafted a wooden hat stand for their keeping.

I survived breast cancer. I returned to school in early spring and life went on as usual. My children continued to grow and thrive; that was the plan! Even though I had to take the drug Tamoxifen for 5 years, I put breast cancer behind me and moved on. These seven years since have been so full with Anna and Brooks and their remarkable high school and college years! The days and months have been filled with ballet, soccer, golf tournaments, church activities, and homework. I am so proud and grateful for the beautiful people they have grown to be! Between caring for my husband and children, and teaching music at GES, my breast cancer experience is pretty much forgotten; and that’s a good thing! One blessing of remembering my experience is the privilege of being able to encourage others who have breast cancer. As I write this, my mother in law, Barbara, is on her way for her first chemotherapy treatment. My friend and former principal, Paula, is recovering from surgery and going through the reconstruction process. Brenda Schwall, a church friend, continues her brave battle that began several years before mine. I pray that I can continue to help and encourage these dear women.

I am a survivor, but I didn’t do it alone. I will forever be grateful to my heavenly Father for His watchful care over my family and me. I will forever be grateful to my First Baptist Chattanooga and Graysville Elementary families. I will forever be grateful to: my mother, Mildred Bostic; my late father, Billy Bostic; my sister and her husband, Gena and Dean; my husband’s parents, Fate and Barbara Thomas; my brother and sister in law, Fate and Susan; my sister in law, Rachel; and my nephew Matthew. I will forever be grateful for the late Dr. Jo Ann Quillian and all she did for my family and me. I will forever be grateful to my doctors who carried me through and helped me beat breast cancer.

In conclusion, my husband and children are my heroes. Together, we are breast cancer survivors! I have been truly blessed.