

Debbie Fassino

## My Journey

In February of 2002, during a self-exam I felt something I hadn't felt before, a lump in my left breast. I called my surgeon who I'd been seeing since 2000 after a yearly exam with my OBGYN who had felt something on my right side and recommended a surgeon to take another look. He had scheduled a stereo tactic biopsy and those results were negative, yay!

Flash-forward back to Feb 2002, my surgeon did a biopsy, the results were negative, yay! I was told not to worry about it but the little voice inside my head kept saying, "Something's not right." I tried to muffle the little voice since the results were negative. In May 2002 I called my surgeon again because I still felt something, he did another biopsy and the results were once again negative. I decided to move forward since both of my biopsies produced negative results but I did so with hesitation.

In October 2002, after my yearly mammogram, they called me back in for additional pictures and an ultrasound. They told me they would let me know if there had been a problem after the radiologist read them.

(Revise this section to make shorter)-The following week I got a letter saying my mammogram was normal and they would see me in 1 year. Since 2000 I would always go and see my surgeon the week after I got my mammogram results. While I'm on the table he looked at the radiographs and said, "Let's do another biopsy." I jumped off the table and said. "Isn't there something else we could do here?!?" He then said we could take out some tissue, which I agreed to, and we scheduled it for the following week.

I had my lumpectomy on Nov 5, 2002 and on Nov. 6<sup>th</sup> my surgeon called and said I had Infiltrating Ductal Cancer. He had to repeat the words 3 times because I thought he was talking to the person sitting next to me, even though I was the only one on the phone. In a very meek voice my surgeon said to me, "I'm so glad you were so persistent." My daughter who was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade at the time then walked in the door from school, her 8<sup>th</sup> grade brother was at his soccer game and I was in "paralyzed fear." I had not yet come out of my bedroom and when my husband came home that night I told him my news. We held each other and I decided we would tell the kids at the same time, after Steve's soccer game.

I don't think I ate dinner; I just couldn't face my daughter with this news. It seemed like hours passed before Steve victoriously came through the door with the winning information, all full of mud and happiness, until my news of course. I felt I was the one who needed to speak to let the kids hear it from me. As the words fell from my mouth, so did their faces. My son was speechless, my daughter quickly asked, "Mom are you going to die?" I didn't really know how to respond, I said, "I'm going to fight, we're all going to fight this together as a family." She fell from my lap in tears and no words came from my son's mouth as he abruptly left the room. I then heard the shower turn and knew he was in there and still to this day I think he cried the whole time.

I never once asked, "why me?" My daughter Rachel took care of that question. Everything went fast and slow after that. I couldn't wait for everyone to leave for school and work the next day so I could cry by myself. When I was done, I took a shower and I began making phone calls looking for a new and competent surgeon. I decided to make 2 appointments and called both offices and had seen both doctors within a couple of days.

They were both on the same page, which made it difficult because I liked them both. As my news spread through the schools and community my phone began ringing.

Mastectomy, chemotherapy, and radiation were where I was going. I had asked for a double mastectomy because back in 2000 the right breast had been the one in question. The insurance company was okay and I didn't have to fight them for my choice, although not a choice I wanted to make, I felt I would not heal if I had to worry about the other side as well.

As I left Dr. Witherspoon's office with my upcoming surgery and treatment information, I turned tearfully to my husband and said, "I want to be able to help the next woman going through this."

I have been involved during the last 11 ½ years with Komen, ACS, Mary Ellen Locher Foundation, Why Me, The Minnie Pearl Foundation, and now Breast Cancer Support Services of Chattanooga. I have been active in different support groups and health and wellness programs, I feel being involved not only helps others but myself as well. I believe we're all here to help one another and through this journey I have met some of the strongest and most fabulous women.

In the early fall of 2003, I decided to go to my first surgeon's office to obtain my records for Dr. Witherspoon. Upon opening the packet in my car, both biopsy reports were missing. I called Dr. Witherspoon's office and was told to go to Memorial's records department and they would supply me with those reports. I asked them if it was normal to have everything else in my file but those 2 reports and the nurse had replied not likely.

(possibly revise last paragraph) I got the reports out and upon reading them I saw medical terms that I didn't understand. I called one of my nurse friends and she told me

that my reports said that my first surgeon hadn't taken enough tissue out for the pathologist to make a diagnosis. We put our faith in our doctors and he betrayed me, he broke my trust, and gambled with my life. All he had to do in Feb. 2002 was take more tissue. I lived with this unwanted companion for 9 months. I sat in my car and cried while wondering if he had even read the pathologist report. Maybe I could have saved my breasts, maybe I wouldn't have had to go through chemotherapy, radiation, Lymphadema, and pain and suffering. Only God has these answers and I know that. This is his Re creation of me and I am grateful everyday that I am here and hopefully make a difference.