

The Faces of Breast Cancer

By Diane Joyner – January 22, 2014

My breast cancer experience started out 21 years ago when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was 25 years old and she was 48 years old. She fought the battle for almost 5 years before it claimed her life. Throughout those 5 years, I watched her go through round after round of chemo and radiation and the cancer would always find its way back to a different part of her body. She lost her hair 5 times in 5 years. The chemo made her deathly sick. I went to most of her doctor appointments and treatments with her and I can remember looking around her doctor's office at the other patients and feeling so sorry for them. There were some who were so sick they could barely sit up in their chair, some who wore turbans, some who wore wigs, some who didn't have any hair, eyebrows or eyelashes and some who just looked really pale with what I called the "cancer look." I remember feeling so depressed just sitting there and looking at the faces of breast cancer because there seemed to be so little hope for them. I remember thinking I never want to be one of those faces with the "cancer look." Fast forward 20 years to November 7, 2012 when I heard those dreaded words myself, "You have breast cancer." I felt like I had been sucker punched. My best friend (and 20-year breast cancer survivor) were on our way to Atlanta to shop. We were in downtown Atlanta traffic when I got the call. Those words will always resonate in my memory. "Infiltrated Ductal Carcinoma." Wow! What was that? I didn't know what that was but I knew it was bad. The nurse gave me the news and said I needed to come back in for more tests and then she said, "Have a nice day." I hung up the phone and whispered to my friend, "I have breast cancer, and she said have a nice day." Did those words really just come out of my mouth? It didn't feel real. It felt like a bad dream. "Have a nice day". Are you kidding me? How can I possibly have a nice day after that? My friend wanted to turn around and come back home but I said, "No, we came to shop and we are going to shop." I determined then that I was not going to let this disease stop me in my tracks. I cried a few tears then but I pulled it together and we shopped the rest of the day. I walked around in a haze all day but I refused to let it stop me. I somehow felt like if I let it stop me from living my life, I would give in to it and I wasn't about to do that. I didn't tell anyone else until we were on our way home that evening because I knew if I did, I would totally lose it and my family was too far away. On the way home that day, my husband called me and I didn't even have to tell him, he just knew by my silence. The flood gates opened and I cried all the way home. When I got home, I just needed some alone time to myself. I prayed, I cried and I made an important decision. I was not going to be one of those faces of breast cancer that I so vividly remembered from 20 years before. I decided that I was going to be strong and fight the fight of my life. Telling my family was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. The next few weeks were a whirlwind of doctor appointments and bad news but one of the first things I learned was that the faces of breast cancer had changed over the past 20 years. I noticed that the faces of cancer sitting around the doctor's office didn't have that "cancer look" like they had before. Yes, some patients still wore turbans, scarves and wigs, although it was hard to tell who had a wig and who didn't, but they looked so "normal" this time. I learned that technology and advances in breast cancer research have improved greatly over the past 20 years and my chances of survival are much higher than my mothers were 20 years ago. My oncologist told me to forget everything I remember about breast cancer from my mother's experience because it had all changed. As I went through the last year of treatment and reconstruction, I always made a point to look around the room at the other patients and note how much healthier they looked than in the past. I noticed "survivors" who had fought the battle and won! I learned that the faces of breast cancer had changed and I wanted to be one of those positive faces of breast cancer that gave hope and inspiration to other cancer patients. That gave me hope that all the efforts that have been put into breast cancer research and finding a cure are working. Though there was nothing easy about going through my diagnosis and treatment, I can

honestly say that I had a much easier time with it than my mother did, thanks to advancements in breast cancer research, new medications, awareness of the disease and early detection. I also learned that it is much easier to go through a cancer diagnosis yourself than it is to watch someone you love go through it. I learned that I am tougher than I thought I was. Early detection truly is the key and I feel that I need to do my part in helping others become aware of this disease and the importance of early detection. Fast forward 20 more years and the sky is the limit with breast cancer research. I am confident that the hard work and efforts of scientists, researchers, breast cancer foundations, volunteers, advocates, and all those who feel the importance of finding a cure will result in an even better outcome for breast cancer patients in the future and hopefully a cure for this disease will be discovered so that my child and future grandchildren don't ever have to experience what my mother and I have experienced. Today, I am proud to be a "face of breast cancer" because it shows how far we have come in the fight for the cure.