

When I first heard “You have cancer” I felt like time just stopped and when it started up again, nothing was the same - that I had entered a new reality. My life became divided into two parts – BC (before cancer) and AC (after cancer.) In order to share my story, I want to share with you the three “life” beliefs that I was living my BC life by and how cancer showed me how to change those beliefs and become a better person. As strange as it sounds, cancer was a blessing with outcomes I never thought possible.

First life belief: You have control over your life.

What cancer taught me: Relax and go with the flow because you really aren’t in charge.

My 8-year journey with cancer started when I was 48 years old. I was in upper management and was responsible for 188 people across 7 states working for the largest public power producer in the US. Working 80+ hours a week, every week was my norm. I made a salary in the 6 figures, had a new car when I wanted, and traveled with my family when we wanted - no complaints. I prided myself on being independent and self-reliant.

I found my lump myself. I first told my husband, thinking that he would just say it was nothing. But instead he said, “I’m going to get you into see the doctor today.” I had a mammogram, ultrasound, and a biopsy all in the same day. A week later I was scheduled for a mastectomy and reconstruction, with chemo starting a week later. The doctors thought that the cancer was contained and they were hopeful I wouldn’t need radiation. Things didn’t go quite that easy. During the surgery, they found out that the cancer had already spread into my lymph nodes and the lump size was approximately 2.5 CM. I was considered to be a stage 2B and would need radiation before reconstruction could be done.

When I woke up after surgery, my husband told me what had happened. He told me that they couldn’t do reconstruction because the cancer had already spread. I was so scared and for the first time I think it really sank in – I had cancer and it might kill me. I was also diagnosed as a triple negative, which limited my post chemo treatment possibilities.

Second life belief: It’s important to always look your best. First impressions are lasting impressions.

What cancer taught me: It’s true, it really is more important on how you are inside than how you look outside.

My first visit with my oncologist after surgery, I asked the same two questions that I bet every woman when diagnosed with breast cancer have asked.

1. What are my chances? I was told that based on the type of cancer I had along with the fact that the cancer had already entered my lymph nodes and my blood stream I had an 80% chance of making it to 5 years. 80%. I had always thought of 80% as a good thing; but 80% when it’s your chance of being alive in 5 years, really doesn’t sound that good.
2. Would I lose my hair during chemo? Now how vain does that make me?

Before chemo I had always complained about my hair – fine, no volume, won’t grow, had to color the gray, etc.; but when I was told I was going to lose it, my hair became my favorite body part. One morning I was using a blow dryer and I went to wrap a section of my hair around a brush and instead of that happening, the whole section came out in my hand. I did what every self-respecting wife would do – I screamed for my husband. I now have great respect for men who have a comb over.

Well, with my strong sense of vanity, I knew there was no way I would want anyone to see me without hair, so I bought a wig I wore the wig everywhere. I didn’t want anyone to see me.

No one mentioned to me how hot wigs can be. I even bought a human hair wig with a special lining that guaranteed you wouldn’t be able to tell you had a wig on. They lied. But every morning I got up to go to work, put that wig on my head and rode out to face the day. I probably had been wearing it for a couple of weeks when I

couldn't take it anymore. I was going through treatment during the summer and that year it was really hot, along with about 500% humidity. One afternoon I was coming home from work and the main interstate that I was on came to a standstill. No one was moving, people were honking their horns and even though my car was air-conditioned, my head started to sweat. I sweated and I sweated until I couldn't take it anymore and I let out a roar and reached up and ripped the wig off my head and threw it on the floor. I'll never forget the look on the faces of the little boy in the car next to mine.

After that, for the most part, I went around bald. My husband loved it because it didn't take me an hour to get ready anymore. Yes, it was humbling at first and I would be embarrassed if people stared; but after a while I didn't notice if they stared or not. This was one of the most freeing and radical things I have ever done. I honestly could go out and not really worry what I looked like. If I could do one thing to help survivors it would be to change how we worry about our looks when we are fighting for our lives.

Third life lesson – Focus on climbing the corporate ladder. The perks are important. Work hard and you will be rewarded.

What cancer taught me – Life is not fair, but if you focus on building relationships with God, your family and your friends – it won't matter. Relationships of love can conquer anything.

I had always felt that my job was who I was; it defined me – it was my identity. As I went through treatment, we were going through about our 10,000th re-organization at work and I had about a million things I needed to do. One day I just got up from my desk and went to my boss and told her that I had enough and I was going to go do something else. Then I went back to my office, called my sweet husband and told him that I thought I had just quit my job. I was totally scared at what I had just done and totally relieved.

My daughter and I had the unique experience of preparing for life and for the possibility of death all at the same time, as she was pregnant with my first grandchild, while I was going through treatment. We have become best friends and while she still asks me sometimes, "Who are you and what have you done with my mother?" we appreciate every moment we have together. I love having adventures with my grandchildren. I have become a "Nana" instead of what I probably would have been – a Grandmother.

My story isn't the most exciting or dramatic or health impacted story; but it is a story of how cancer helped a corporate ladder climbing, impatient, calendar driven individual who believed a woman's career defined who she was to morph into a Nana, who treasures family time above all else, drives a 7 year old car, works at a community college and thanks God every day for the blessing of one more day.