

Lynn Hutcheson

I was 31 years old and six months pregnant when my breast cancer journey began. My paternal grandmother had breast cancer in her early thirties but the thought that I might get it never crossed my mind. On August 12th, 2002, as I was showering before work, I felt a lump on my left breast. Not really concerned, I put in a call to my OBGYN. I was seen that day and an appointment was set up with a local general surgeon. Still not concerned, because I was told that this was the protocol any time a lump was palpable, I went on. My general surgeon at that time thought that this might be a swollen milk gland due to the pregnancy but asked me to watch it and return in 3 weeks. Upon my return, my general surgeon thought I should have a surgical breast biopsy done. Neither a mammogram or needle biopsy was an option because of the pregnancy. The lump had not gotten smaller and may have grown. On October 1st, I had a surgical biopsy. Thankfully, my Mom had come down and was with me when I received a call to come in to the office. I called my husband who had just left home after a lunchtime visit to return to work. He picked me up and the two of us went together. I was told I had breast cancer. Later pathology reports would determine that I had Stage 2 triple negative breast cancer, an aggressive breast cancer that responds well to chemotherapy.

Although not uncommon, my OBGYN had never had a patient with breast cancer while pregnant. He asked that I see a physician at Emory Hospital in Atlanta to determine a course of treatment. We determined that I would have a lumpectomy followed by chemotherapy and radiation. It was also recommended that I be induced and have my baby early so that I could begin chemotherapy as soon as possible. This, I chose not to do. So, I had a lumpectomy and waited for my little girl to arrive. My very healthy, full term baby arrived on November 20th. (Because I was so close to my due date, this was an option for me. Had it been earlier on in my pregnancy, the choice might have been different.) Chemotherapy was begun on December 30th (after allowing time to heal from delivery), just in time for the New Year. My first treatment was done IV in my arm. After that, I received future treatments via port a cath inserted into my chest wall in January. I received 4 treatments of Adriamycin and Cytosan, one every three weeks. At this point, due to a job change for my husband, we moved 5 hours north. I met a new Medical Oncologist. Here, I had 4 treatments of Taxol, one every 3 weeks. After this, I had 35 radiation treatments.

The side effects that I had with the AC chemotherapy were not notable. I tolerated them well. I was tired, food and drinks tasted strange, and my hair was gone by day 13. Once, I did try to skip the Neulasta shot given to boost white blood cell production because my counts had always been so good. This didn't work and I ended up having a course of shots because my white blood cell count plummeted. Taxol caused achiness in my joints, some neuropathy in my fingers and toes, and some bleeding under my toenails. It wasn't pleasant but I got through with the support of my family and friends. My new baby girl and my active 7-year-old son kept me going and I knew I couldn't stop.

I continued for five years with follow up visits every 3-4 months. Prognosis was good after that point. Visits stretched from every 6 months to once a year. I did yearly mammograms, self-exams and had chest x-rays to watch my heart (Adriamycin is toxic to the heart).

On June 18th, 2011, my husband and I went to Len Foote Hike Inn for our 18th anniversary. It's a 5 mile hike and after I needed a shower. While in the shower I found a lump in my right breast, mirror image to the spot on my left in 2002. I told my husband what I found but decided to try my best to ignore what I knew and enjoy the rest of our anniversary weekend. On Monday, I was able to have a mammogram and a needle biopsy. By Wednesday, I knew that I had breast cancer again and this time it was diagnosed as Stage 1 triple negative. I scheduled a lumpectomy and port installation at the same time. Because there is a lifetime maximum one can have of Adriamycin (due to the heart toxicity), it was decided I would have Taxotere and Cytosan. I was set to have 6 of these treatments every two weeks.

The side effects of the Taxotere were not bearable. With this, I had nosebleeds, mouth sores, numbness in fingers and toes, Hand-Foot Syndrome (essentially, burns on the palms of my hands followed by the soles of my feet), diarrhea and eventually extremely low white blood count, hemoglobin and platelet counts and, of course, hair loss. After the 3rd treatment, Taxotere was replaced with Taxol and treatments were stretched to 3 weeks. Side effects went away except for the low blood and platelet counts, which continued to decline warranting 3 blood transfusions and a platelet transfusion. Still, I got through this and the 35 radiation treatments that followed with much help from my family. My children, now a bit older, kept me going. My husband gave me neulasta shots, shaved my head when the time came, held my hand, and kept me company when I didn't feel like getting up from the bed. My mom, thankfully, loves to do laundry. She kept mine going. When I was too weak to push the vacuum, it didn't matter. I have a part-time job that I was able to coordinate around treatments and never missed a beat. I have been so fortunate in many ways.

Today, my journey goes on as I continue the reconstruction process after an elective double mastectomy in August 2013. In 2012, at the suggestion from my Medical Oncologist, I chose to have genetic counseling and testing. This resulted in my knowledge of a BRCA 1 mutation from my father's side (he tested as well). With this knowledge and my history I chose to have a Laproscopic Oophorectomy and Hysterectomy in September 2012 using laparoscopy. I later chose to have a double mastectomy. Due to tissue damage from radiation, the more recently radiated breast has not healed and has resulted in two additional minor surgeries to clean out the area and cut back some of the damaged skin. I still wait for healing.

I look forward to the completion of my reconstruction and the fact that I do not have to worry any longer about breast cancer. I hope that I can be an encouragement to other women diagnosed with breast cancer and encourage those who never have had it to perform self-exams and to make their appointments for yearly exams.

