

Cancer Survivor Story - Jenny and Patty

Jenny and Patty have been friends for almost 50 years, since their families were neighbors in Topeka in the early 1960's. Throughout those years they have shared many things- school days, marriages, births and the ups and downs of everyday life. What they didn't expect to share was breast cancer. Both women are survivors- Patty diagnosed in June 2001 and Jenny in March of 2009.



They discussed the differences in diagnosis, surgery and treatment and how just 8 years has made a tremendous difference in how their cancers were dealt with. Both women found their own lumps in their breasts and both sought immediate diagnosis.

Patty said she never had a core biopsy done and after her self-detection, her lump was located by a radiologist through a sonogram. She was told that it wasn't cancer, but she wanted the lump removed and insisted on surgery. When the tumor was biopsied after her short hospital stay, she got the phone call that she did indeed have breast cancer. "My doctor told me this had never happened before, but I am glad I insisted on removal of the tumor because even though my cancer was at Stage 1, it was very aggressive, although not hormone related." She then had a second surgery to take out the margins of the tumor and the sentinel lymph nodes in her left arm. She knew she had an increased risk of the cancer spreading since she was opened up twice. Her surgery was followed by chemotherapy with adriamycin and cytoxan once a week every three weeks for four treatments. She then had a 12 week round of radiation therapy. She had several setbacks including a blood clot that developed in her port, but came through her ordeal with a strong will to live her life to the fullest. "My kids didn't want me sick and they panicked that they might lose me."

Jenny said she learned a lot through Patty's experience with breast cancer. "I joked with her that she got it first so she could help me on down the line." Indeed Patty has become Jenny's advocate, going to appointments with her and answering her questions and concerns. "It's great to have such a close friend who completely understands what you are going through. It has made this whole thing easier for me."

Jenny was diagnosed with breast cancer on March 27, 2009, after a core biopsy detected cancer cells in the tumor she had self-identified. She had several other tests before having surgery on April 21. Her cancer was a Stage 2 and like Patty's, very aggressive and not hormone driven. But since her tumor was identified through the biopsy as cancer she was able to have just the one surgery where the tumor margins were removed along with several lymph nodes for testing. She was lucky in that the cancer had not spread to those nodes. When she began her chemotherapy with the same two drugs as Patty had taken, she was relieved to know that she would be given anti-nausea and anti-anxiety drugs. She knew that Patty has suffered from extreme nausea and vomiting with her chemo and the drugs had made her quite anxious. "This made a big difference in how I felt during chemo. I was told that I shouldn't have to feel sick," said Jenny. Her chemotherapy treatments also were scheduled so that she could still fully participate in one son's wedding and another's graduation. She also continues to teach school full time. "I guess you could say, I am still taking care of everyone!" Jenny begins 12 weeks of radiation therapy in a few weeks, following her last chemo treatment.

Both women lamented that their breast cancer treatment brought on early menopause, mood swings, darkening of their finger nails and toenails, swelling in their feet and other annoying side effects. They are aware of their risk of a cancer recurrence especially in their lungs, bones and brains. But each is determined that breast cancer will not define their lives. Both are advocates of self breast exams. "If you find a lump, do something about it," Patty said. "And don't wait," added Jenny.

Editor's Note: Jenny was set to begin radiation treatment but as part of her cancer risk assessment underwent genetic testing. It was identified during the testing that she has the BRCA II gene, raising her risk of developing cancer later in life. She ultimately decided to undergo a complete mastectomy and hysterectomy to lower her risk and prolong her life.

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