Our MCC Breast Cancer Survivors' Stories

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Office of Experiential Learning
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Kathy Gurin's Story

Kathy is a faculty member in the Health Sciences division at Mott Community College. Kathy's story was published in 1995 by McLaren Hospital and is being presented here for educational purposes.

Five years ago, Kathryn (Kathy) Gurin was in a race for her life. At the age of 37, she battled breast cancer and won. This fall, determined to win another race and encourage other victims of the disease, she crossed the finish line at the Detroit Free Press Marathon. But she didn't do it alone.

Her friends and co-workers at Lapeer Regional Hospital were with her every step of the way. On the day of the race, they made an impressive team as they crossed from Canada into the United States proudly displaying their sponsor's name, McLaren Health Care Corporation**.**

It was just one of the many events McLaren Health Care Corporation employees were involved in during 1996. Eager to tell their stories of hope, and support many worthwhile causes, the people of McLaren ran road races, spoke before Kathy Gurin groups of all ages, served on boards, painted homes, participated in parades and volunteered thousands of hours to benefit others. This quest is strengthened by the McLaren mission to care for the communities and people in the expanding region it serves. The same team spirit needed to accomplish everyday medical miracles within its doctors' offices, specialty centers, hospitals and home care services is undauntedly displayed on the streets of our cities throughout the year.

Kathy learned first-hand how the spirit of McLaren can affect the outcome of a life-threatening medical malady. It was that spirit which brought her to the finish line in Detroit where she and Robin McIntosh, her co-worker and training mentor, clung to one another sharing tears of joy at her accomplishment. It was a far cry from the Kathy who was devastated when a self-examination in May of 1991 detected a cancerous tumor in her left breast. Ratan Rajani, M.D., performed successful mastectomy surgery at Lapeer Regional Hospital.

"I had always been active before my surgery, participating in various sporting activities such as skiing and running," she expounded. "Following the surgery, however, I found myself at a slow crawl". Unable to lift her shoulder, she felt exhausted and routinely sick following chemotherapy treatments. "My activity level ceased to be and I had, in essence, given up!"

She was fortunate, however, to have a wonderful family and group of friends. Her husband, Robert Cramer, and her three stepchildren and three grandchildren were a tremendous support to her. But it was Robin McIntosh, a McLaren physician service representative, who literally took Kathy under her wing and guided her flight to recovery.

"Robin, a past winner of the Detroit race walking event, was determined not to let me become a couch potato," Kathy explained. "She introduced me to the art of race walking, starting me off gently in a local three-mile race."

Robin continued to nurture Kathy and helped her develop her official race walking style. "I grew stronger physically and emotionally through walking and soon was competing and even winning some race walking events," stated Kathy.

In the eight-mile Mackinac Island race Sept. 8, Robin and Kathy took first and second places, respectively. Encouraged, the two set their sights on competing in the 26-mile Detroit Free Press Marathon the following month. While training, however, Kathy "blew out" her knee.

That familiar team spirit at McLaren that had gotten her this far was sparked once again. This time the Sports Medicine Department at Lapeer Regional Medical Center went into action. They guided her through a series of physical therapy sessions while teaching her stretching techniques. Four weeks before the race Kathy was back on her feet again.

On race day the two donned their McLaren Health Care Corporation shirts, pinned on their numbers and began a steady gait from the Canadian border. Although it was grueling, Kathy never gave up. Robin's second place finish in the female division seemed anticlimactic compared to watching Kathy cross the line after five hours and nine minutes on the course. "It was exciting for her to see that I had made it," said Kathy. "We cried together at the finish line."

Thanks to the spirit of McLaren people and their guiding forces which led to this moment, it was the perfect ending to Kathy's five-year anniversary victory celebration over cancer.

While coping with the disease she continued to work and complete a five-year master's degree program at Eastern Michigan University in Educational Leadership. Noting that cancer gives you a reason to live life to the fullest she even tried a new sport, skydiving! Often she uses her inspiring message of hope and determination to educate and comfort others. "I'm an example, especially to young women. Do the right thing, don't ignore any symptoms of breast cancer. You can get through it and lead a wonderful, normal life."

“I grew stronger physically and emotionally through walking and soon was competing and even winning some race walking events."

Dr. Beverly Walker Griffea

Dr. Beverly Walker Griffea is the President of Mott Community College. This story was written and published with permission by Dr. Beverly Walker Griffea.

Suddenly there was no air. I could see his mouth moving. But there was no comprehension of sound. What did he say? My mind felt like I was trapped in some sort of third dimension that left me between reality and a really bad dream. What did he say? Come on Beverly focus. Pay attention.

Stage 2 Breast Cancer? But how could that be?

I had a mammogram in January and my annual exam with a breast check-up in February, 2010. My doctor declared I was in excellent health! “Excellent health,” she said. I had never had a doctor say that before and I felt good.

Everything was lining up nicely in my life. My son was graduating from high school in June. I was ready to take my next professional step...a college presidency.

I attended the AACC National Conference that April in Seattle with expectancy. My plan was to attend the Preconvention Workshop: Gateway to the Presidency, network at the conference and learn from the myriad of forums.

One morning in the hotel, I felt a lump in my nipple. It was in such an odd place I immediately called the doctor's office from Seattle. I am sure when she looked at my records--Clear mammogram--Clean bill of health in February--she thought this is just another one of Beverly's lump in breast scares. (I have had lumpy breasts since attending undergrad at Oklahoma State University.) So she didn't immediately agree to see me. She put me in the rotation.

I got in to see her in May and she didn't think it was anything, but to be sure she sent me to have an ultrasound. And then suddenly, I found myself creeping in to be the reluctant star of a really scary Twilight Zone episode.

I was sitting in a radiologist office waiting for the results of my biopsy. The first thing I thought was I didn't know they had offices. When he came in he began to speak very deliberate and fast. My mind was stuck on the first six words though. You have stage 2 Breast Cancer. But in my haze he had moved on sharing a lot of words that I couldn't comprehend. As he left he said it will be a hard year, but you will make it through fine.

My new path was not the one I was expecting. It was a road I had NEVER thought I would travel. A mastectomy immediately. Five months of almost weekly chemo until the last dose. I felt like I was going to die the day before Christmas Eve. Bloated. No hair. Little feeling in my feet and hands. Food tasted like tin. Being stuck with a needle, it seemed like daily. Taking medicine at a specific time to counteract the chemo. Crying at the drop of a hat. Not out of physical pain, but emotional pain. It was hard to smile.

Out of the haze, I decided to call the American Cancer Society. I talked with a very nice lady that registered me for everything. She sent me everything.

For a person like me information was everything. So I read all the literature. It became my lifeline for knowledge.

I took a friend (AAWCC Board Member, Deborah Fontaine) with me to attend the Look Good. Feel Better program. She was my buffer. But the cosmetologists that donated their time to give cancer patients a free make over were so kind and compassionate I stopped feeling like I had cancer. I felt normal for that brief period.

It seemed like we were all at a Mary Kay party as we said no that's not your color. Ooh now that looks nice. And to top it off we got to look at the TLC products and take home a wig, cosmetics and other donated items straight from top companies. The most important thing for me was that for that time period we could smile. So, don't tell anyone, but I went twice. The second time by myself. And that experience kept me going during the bleak times.

The American Cancer Society is more than a commercial or something you donate to so you can feel good about yourself. The organization stands in the gap for millions that cannot help themselves. The volunteers are kind, caring and compassionate people that help. They helped me become a survivor, become a college president and I am grateful that they were there when I called.

October is breast cancer awareness month. Please increase your knowledge and awareness of this potentially devastating disease.

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Janet Westhoff

Janet Westhoff is a retired faculty member of the Health Sciences division at Mott Community College. This story was written and published with the permission of Janet Westhoff.

It was one year and one day after 9/11 that I received my diagnosis of breast cancer, but I don't think that date was really prophetic. I think I already knew my biopsy would be positive.

Anyway, that started me on a long road I never thought I'd travel - I joined a club that isn't very exclusive. Since September 12, 2002, I have met so many people who were breast cancer patients in treatment, breast cancer survivors, and future breast cancer hosts. We all travel the same road to become a "survivor".

My breast cancer was atypical in that it wasn't found on mammogram. In fact, I'd had my annual screening about 3 months before, and all was good. Not. In August, a lump led to an ultrasound, where it was detected—in stark black and white.

Yes, I am a nurse. A nurse educator, in fact, but, what I knew about cancer, and breast cancer, you can put into a thimble. But, that was not the time for a formal education, because, you see, I had an overwhelming need—for the first time in my life—to be a patient. I was in "need-to-know" mode. Just give me the Readers Digest version!

Fortunately, I landed at my alma mater, the University of Michigan, at the Cancer Center. I was scanned, screened, re-biopsied, and put into a treatment plan. That plan consisted of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. The whole enchilada. (I had hoped to wiggle out of chemo, but that wasn't part of my UM team's plan!)

The surgery part was no big deal. Chemo, on the other hand….it kicked me in the rear! It certainly isn't pretty. I lost my hair...and my eyelashes and eyebrows. I lost all of my fingernails and toenails. I was sick. Nausea and vomiting for several days after every treatment. One of the drugs resulted in heart issues. Another one hastened hearing loss. Fatigue was the worst, relentless part of it. I can't begin to describe the fatigue. It was all-consuming.

Then chemo was done! Four treatments. Every 3 weeks, from November into January. About 2 weeks later, I started radiation. Again, no big deal. The worst part, for me, about radiation was that it consisted of daily treatments for 35 sessions. Each session took about 5 minutes, from start to end. And, I got my first tattoos out of it! Three little purple markers that guided the beam of radiation to the right target and helped to avoid vital tissues, like lungs and heart.

That’s my cancer story.

Except the most important part of any story lives around the edges and fills in the details. The most important part of my story rests with the support systems I had. First and foremost, of course, was my medical team, which consisted of -- my primary care physician in Flint, the medical and surgical oncologists in Ann Arbor, my radiation oncologists at the Genesys-Hurley Cancer Center, and my cardiologist. They put up with so many questions, concerns, and what-ifs!

Family and friends are critical supports to any cancer patient. They carried me every step, from company during chemo, to cleaning, meal prep, laundry...and emotional support. My friends at Mott were exceptional! They filled for me every day, and were endlessly patient with my ups and downs. Everyone should have a support system like this! One other valuable support was my little ginger and white Cocker spaniel, Kelly. She was my chemo buddy who stayed with me all day, every day!

One bittersweet support was my 90-year-old dad, who died while I was still in radiation. About 3 weeks before his death, he told me he wanted to come and live with me so he could “take care” of me. (He was the only person I showed my bald head to!)

So, what are the take-aways from my story? First, breast cancer is treatable and highly survivable. You just need to follow through with regular screenings—your own screens as well as those of your primary provider. Girls/women need to start early, especially if there is a family history. Don’t forget that men get breast cancer, too!

Second, your health team matters. You need to have medical, surgical, and radiation oncologists that you trust and can relate to. I still have my mammograms and visit the nurse practitioner from my medical team at UM every year. I trust them.

Education, even at the Readers Digest level, is important. Learn all you can about early detection and treatment. Statistics show that about one in 4 women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. As my sisters said, I ruined their gene pool!

Finally, enough can't be said about the support of family and friends - that's how you make it through. You can try to make it up to them when it's all over!

It's a long year of diagnosis, treatment, and follow-ups, but, then it's over and life starts to return to normal. And 18 years later...

My thoughts and prayers are with all survivors and those currently in treatment. May those who were not able to survive Rest in Peace. My prayers are for you, too.

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Carol Nielson

Carol Nielson is a retired faculty member of the Cosmetology department at Mott Community College. This story was written and published with permission by Carol Nielson.

In 2002, I found out that I had Ductal Carcinoma In-situ after a routine mammogram. Neither the doctor, nor I, could feel the lump. If it wasn't for the mammogram, I may not have been diagnosed until it had progressed into a more invasive form of breast cancer.

After surgery and taking Tamoxifen for five years, I thought I had beaten it. However, in 2014, after another routine (but necessary) mammogram, they found it in the other side. After surgery and radiation treatments, I have been cancer free!

It is so important to support the Making Strides Against Breast Cancer movement by donating whatever you can afford. Your help allows more research, support, and life-saving mammograms. I was very fortunate to have access to screening, doctors, and treatments, but so many others do not. Please donate to help save lives!

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