

Laurie Kimball's Story

In June of 2014, I underwent an emergency Appendectomy. It occurred late in the afternoon, so I stayed overnight and was sent home the next day. Two days following that surgery, I was scheduled for my routine mammogram which I had been having for many years, as my mother was a Breast Cancer survivor as well. I was not in any pain, so I decided to just get it done anyway. Contrary to what you may hear, a mammogram is not painful. At most, it is uncomfortable, and only for a few seconds. Hindsight 20-20. I am so grateful that I didn't put this test off, not even one day. In early July, I received a letter stating they wanted to re-do my mammogram and also do an Ultrasound. Working in the Medical field from all my adult life, I knew this meant "they saw something" on that mammogram. I also knew that it wasn't necessarily Cancer. During the exam, the technician seemed to stay focused in one small area. In my heart of hearts, I knew. Being diagnosed with BC is like riding on a merry-go-round and going very, very fast. You hold on for dear life with every turn and at times, you cannot even focus on what is ahead. This began that ride for me. There was definitely "suspicious spots" so I was scheduled for a biopsy. When they asked who I wanted for a surgeon, I had no idea. But I chose Dr Ryan Walker because he had just done my Appendectomy. As I sat in the waiting room of Dr Walkers office a few days later, he saw me. He smiled and motioned me to come in and he took me right into an exam room. He asked if I was having issues with my appendectomy scars (this is why he thought I was there) and I looked him straight on and said "No, I have a lump in my breast- I need a biopsy" He replied, "Let me get your chart" and he hurried out of the room to retrieve it. He returned and began to question me. He examined me and said that according to my scans, these areas of concern are deep - almost against the chest wall. He said I would have never felt a "lump" until it was too late. He comforted me saying that it is not always Cancer, but we don't want to waste any time. As I checked out, they booked me for a Stereotactic biopsy the following week. This was July 29th, 2014.

Working in the hospital myself for so many years, I knew alot of people in many departments. Some people have asked me if I felt "weird" going through such a personal journey with people I knew and see every day. The answer to that question is NO- never once was I uncomfortable. I had known some of these technicians for 20+ years. I knew how they worked and how they treated their patients, and their patients' families. I wanted them on my team. And that is exactly what they became.... My Cancer warriors.

The biopsy was not a pleasant experience, for me, having a resistance to local anesthetic was a painful complication. The two Imaging technicians in with me that day were angels. I have known them both over 20 years. They coached me, encouraged me, counted minutes for me,

and held me still- physically!! After it was over, they comforted me, gave me hope and I will never forget their kindness or their concern and caring.

August 1st, 2014 was the life changing day. I was driving to Walmart and my phone rang. It was a St Mary's phone number, so I pulled over and took the call. It was Dr. Walker with my results. He asked me if I could talk, and I said yes. His exact words were " Well, not the results we were hoping for. You have Breast Cancer but it is very early" He was very calm- compassionate and reassuring, and I felt confident that I had picked the right surgeon. St Mary's Healthcare- the place I have worked and loved for so many years, would be where I would battle this war. No question.

The support I received from not only my co-workers but so many others was indescribable. They circled their wagons around me and were determined that I would not fight this alone. Once I had decided to make my diagnosis public (on Face Book) the support I received was even more overwhelming. People I didn't even know would message me with hope, prayers and encouragement as well as other women who had been through this themselves gave me helpful tips for the battle I had ahead of me. They sent me care packages, gas cards, things I never dreamed I would need, but that proved to be indispensable on my Cancer journey. I was so deeply grateful for their insight, but most of all I promised to pay it forward and be the same source of inspiration and hope that they were to me, to another woman who would one day walk in these shoes.

Surgery: My surgery was to be a 3-step process. 1st to Nuclear Med to be injected with a dye that would exit through my *sentinel node and tell them if my Cancer had spread, then a mammo guided insertion of a guide wire that would pinpoint my small areas of Cancer, and finally to the OR for removal of the Cancer itself by means of a Lumpectomy. Every single person whose hands touched me on this day was kind, caring and so very compassionate. It is very difficult to put into words the amazing care I was given. Dr Walker believed that I would only need to have follow up Radiation and we were so relieved that no Chemo was in my future. Or was it??? * the sentinel lymph node is the main filtering node that would be the first one affected had the Cancer spread. This too is a "preserving" procedure. Rather than sample numerous nodes to be sure all are clear, this one node tells them the same information and only one has to be removed

Treatment: Dr Deborah Sculco was my chosen Oncologist. She came highly recommended by a co-worker who was her Medical Technologist in the Cancer center. She assured me that although Dr Sculco is a "home grown" Amsterdam girl, her Oncology practice had made her a leader, and a well respected giant in her field. My initial visit with her was to go over the Pathology report and decide my course of treatment. By appearance, she was a small woman, but as I came to know her- this woman was fierce and mighty warrior in the war against Cancer. She spoke softly and explained things to my husband and I in a calm, and fully understandable manner. Until. she said the "C" word. **CHEMOTHERAPY**. My husband instantly said "But Dr

Walker said she only needs Radiation" but as Dr Sculco would explain, Chemo was the best way to ensure my future health and obtain Remission from my Cancer. As she spoke, I looked at my husband who was white as a ghost. Listening, but not really hearing a word she said. Surgeons only have the surgical information to base their decisions on, but the Oncologist has both the Surgical and Pathology to go on. Chemotherapy was not an option for me, it was now an absolute necessity to save my life.

Eat Pray Fight- Chemotherapy: Round One

After my 1st appointment with Dr Sculco, I was set up to have a port inserted in order to preserve my veins and administer Chemotherapy drugs effectively. This was a very easy procedure -done as an Outpatient. My port sat just under the skin below my right collarbone about 4 finger widths down into my chest. I see that scar today and it's a reminder of my lifeline. It looked very similar to a pacemaker implant. The port is inserted, and a catheter is connected to a large vein for direct fluid (Chemo) delivery into the blood stream. This can also be used for blood drawing and limit the amount of actual needle sticks you have to endure. It was uncomfortable for a few weeks, but eventually you get used to it. My first Chemo session was scheduled for Tuesday 10/7/2014.

This was the day of dread. The one I feared the most. I had opted to do dose-dense Chemo treatments, which means I got a treatment every other week- rather than one every 3 weeks. I just wanted this over, but Dr. Sculco also felt it was best. If a woman is strong and healthy and can handle it, dose dense administration is best for BC. Years back, I had a conversation with a pharmacist friend about Chemotherapy medications and he said something I will never forget. He said they figure how much will kill you, and then they back it off slightly. THAT was the thought going through my mind on this morning. What if they are wrong- What if they give me too much. or too little???? I had read up on all the side effects and I was prepared for battle. What I wasn't prepared for is all the things they do not necessarily tell you. Chemo effects your taste, smell, nails, and it's a known fact that you will lose your hair. I wasn't too upset over that (it does grow back) although I know for some women this is the most tragic thing of all. What they don't tell you is that you lose your hair, everywhere!!! Eye lashes, nose hair and every other unmentionable place!! Not having hair in your nose presents a whole new world of smell. Everything smelled so strong. I couldn't tolerate smells at all. Not even nice ones. Everything was overpowering to the point of instant headache & nausea.

Although I wasn't looking forward to losing my hair- it wasn't the worst thing for me either. However, no one had told me that losing your hair this way is so painful. A few days after my 1st treatment, I went to my hairdresser and had it cut right down GI Jane style! And only a day or so after my 2nd treatment, my remaining hair started to fall out. It hurt and it itched so bad. I couldn't stand to lie my head on a pillow. I couldn't scratch it because if I dug myself and got an infection, I would be in real trouble with my white count so low. It's hard to describe how it hurts to have your hair fallout from the root/follicle. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer and I asked my husband to shave it off. He did so, being ever so gentle and careful not to cause a nick

in my skin. Only this man could make me laugh during something so emotionally traumatic- I don't know if I have ever loved him more than in this very difficult- emotional moment.

A Chemo treatment takes about 4 hours. My husband and daughter went with me to every treatment to help pass the time and make me laugh. On this 1st day I met a true and undisputable angel... sweet Ashley, my Chemo nurse. She explained everything that would happen to us in great detail. She was kind, compassionate, understanding, and she made us laugh...a lot! Ashley became so much more to us than "my nurse". She remains a dear friend to me and to my family. She was a constant cheerleader, a voice of hope and encouragement. She became my advocate in so many ways. My Chemo regimen consisted of 3 drugs- One that was so thick that it couldn't be run through my IV. It had to be through IV Push. My sweet Ashley would sit beside me for 30 minutes and slowly push the medication into my IV. This drug was the worst one- They call it the "Red devil" It was red in color and the side effects from it were horrible. It truly WAS the devil. The worst thing about having Cancer is by far, the treatment. But when you balance all those horrible side effects against LIFE, it is well worth it. Treatments made me feel extremely tired. By the next day, the exhaustion was setting in. And by day 4 I was barely able to go to the bathroom alone. I was so weak. My days were spent in a state of not really asleep but not really awake. On the good days, I would get up and wrap my baby bald head in a wrap (wigs were not for me !!) and apply some makeup to look better than I felt. One of the worst side effects for me came not from the Chemo, so much but from the injection I had to have (Neulasta) 24 hours after treatment to prevent my white count from plummeting. The severe bone pain and degree of sheer exhaustion from this shot was all-consuming. There were days when I would just lie there, and tears fell uncontrollably from my eyes. The pain is indescribable. My faith in God is all I can say got me through these dark times. I knew he would heal me or bring me home- Either way I would be okay. These side effects would last 4-5 days, so by the time I started to feel somewhat normal again, it was time for another treatment and the whole cycle would start all over again.

After a Chemo treatment, it is imperative to drink fluids to "flush" the Chemo through your body. This sounds so easy- Just hydrate. Except Chemo also affects your taste buds. Everything for me tasted and smelled like kerosene, even water. It was a metallic, horrible taste. I consumed barely any fluids at all... if I tried to force them, I would vomit. And I got so sick and dehydrated that I ended up in the ED, barely conscious. My youngest daughter had thought she would swing by and check on me on her way home from work, found me incoherent & lethargic and called the Dr. who said to get me to the ED. Two bags of normal saline later, I felt like a million bucks. well. not really, but much improved!!! To combat this, Ashley would have me

come back in on day 3 and she would run 2 bags of fluid through me and it got much better after that. Side note- this same daughter when I told her as gently as I could of my diagnosis, collapsed to the floor and said she couldn't do this. She said she wasn't strong like me. I took her in my arms and told her she had no choice BUT to be strong because I could not be. I have to fight for my life- I told her she HAD to be strong for me. She rose to the challenge and was my best "home" nurse! We called her the "sani-police" because she wouldn't let anyone near me without sanitizing their hands, including my husband!!! She sat with me in the ER, she was at every procedure- every treatment, every Dr visit. She kept my husband sane. She organized a fund raiser with my sister, she kept all her siblings in the loop, she was more than I could have ever asked her to be.

Another part of Cancer that is grossly underrated is CHEMO BRAIN. It is memory loss and inability to recall things. words, and memories caused by the drugs used to save your life. You have difficulty concentrating, finding the proper words, short term memory issues etc... This still plagues me today, and sometimes makes me so sad- and at times angry of what Cancer took from me. But then I remember that these drugs also took my CANCER, so I let it go. You find peace with it eventually. I've become a master at concealing how very difficult this is for me at times. Even from my family. I couldn't bear to tell my husband that I have very little recollection of our amazing wedding in Key West. It was so incredibly special, but I only remember small broken bits and pieces of that week. Thankfully we have amazing pictures that tell that story.

That is some of the ugly side of Cancer and all it brings with it. Now I will tell you the beautiful side.

Cancer made me so humble. I have always been a person of gratitude, but this diagnosis enhanced that ten-fold. Once I had made my diagnosis public, people came out of the woodwork in support. Fellow survivors shared their stories with me and gave me hope. A good friend of mine had a younger sister who was diagnosed at the age of 30- She had a double mastectomy, chemo, radiation- the works. She also had 3 young children. She is a survivor. She showed up at my job one day with a basket of things to help me through Chemo- water bottles (for hydration) ginger candies for nausea, warm, fluffy socks, a note pad, and pen for Dr visits, but the one thing I remember most was a piece of advice she gave me. She said you have to fight this- you have to be tough no matter how hard it gets because someone who is watching you fight this fight ...a daughter, a sister, a friend. It may be them one day and you want them to remember how brave you were so that they will be brave too. You can say to them "If I can do it- so can you" I have never, ever forgotten this. That has truly become my purpose and my path. My faith plays heavily into it, and I am not shy to share it.

I made friends with so many people who just reached out to me, many of them still today we keep in touch. People sent me gifts, cards, flowers, gas cards, fed my husband. The kindness was endless. At Christmas, I didn't have the energy to decorate or even put up a tree. My husband insisted he would do it- but I begged him not to- a man decorating my tree would give me too much anxiety!!!! So, he bought me a small tree and people sent me Breast cancer ornaments of all kinds for it. That tree still decorated -stands in the corner of my bedroom today, as a stoic reminder of all I have come through. One of the most profound and moving moments on this journey for me was on a day I was working in the Rao Lab. One of the Phlebotomists came to me and said, " my patient is sick, she is throwing up- I can't do her Labs but they need it for her Chemo" I went in there and knelt down to this sick, frail, crying woman and said to her "Chemo sucks" But I promise you it will get better. She looked up at me and said you?? I said yep- I am a 5-year survivor. And she smiled. But that wasn't the moment. It was her husband sitting helpless beside her with tears in his eyes that asked if I really went through all this too. I assured him it is a very hard road, but that it is worth it in the end when she is healthy again and she will be. He asked me a few questions that I answered, and then I drew her blood and sent them on their way. With his arm around his weak trembling wife to support her, he reached for my hand and said ..."you gave us both hope and we needed that today" I knew right then and there that God would use me and put me in the path of someone who needed to hear my story . My story of the fight. my story of the battle. My story of survival & life after Cancer.

There are many things- (and people) I can attribute to saving my life, but the bottom line is, it was me. It is difficult for me to take credit, because there are so many others who played such important roles in my recovery but it was my diligence in getting screened yearly that made all the difference in the outcome. I was blessed to have my manager and co-workers support through it all. And now that we are fortunate to have a benefit at St Mary's that offers PTO (Paid Time Off) to cover these screening visits, there is NO reason NOT to get them done. If like me, you have a family history, and just getting a routine mammo brings you anxiety, worry and fear, there are things you can do to help with that. Do it with a friend- or your sister. Make your appointments together, back-to-back and be there for each other. Take a good book to read, or music to listen to so your mind is occupied while you wait. No matter what you have to do to get through it. GET SCREENED. There is a good chance that it may one day save your own life.









