

Life, Love and Heroes

By: Darlene Christenson – Bird Island, MN

Life's experiences are unique, and how we deal with those experiences is our own choice. However, sometimes our choices may be influenced by our environment at that time. In that case, the choice may not be entirely our own. This is key. This is life. No matter what circumstance... no matter what age.

I was asked to share an experience which, in all respects, became a life changing adventure for me. Suddenly, I was forced to face a situation that involved digesting a lot of information. It was followed by lots of prayer and tears. Fortunately, I was able to make good choices with the help of many amazing people.

On May 25, 2016, I was diagnosed with invasive-ductal carcinoma (breast cancer for short). From my own personal discovery, to the exam, biopsy, surgery and treatment, I was surrounded by an incredible team of professionals who carried me and my family on an amazing journey. These folks focused on me and my affliction and kept my family informed of each step occurring along the way. This story focuses on these amazing people who chose a profession of healing. Their dedication is beyond any words I can put on paper.

The discovery was simple enough... I was sorting laundry. Typically I don't look at dirty laundry as I bag, pitch and toss - hoping a red

shirt doesn't get mixed up with the whites. On this particular day, a sports bra caught my attention as the interior was white and a bloody secretion the size of the tip of my pinkie finger pretty much screamed out, "look at this!" It wasn't long before the phone call was made to ACMC in Willmar. The gal on the other end of the phone didn't waste any time scheduling an appointment immediately that morning. From the moment I stepped into the clinic a plan was set in motion to assess, analyze and remedy the situation by this phenomenal team.

My first nurse to start this journey was my good, and much loved friend, Patti Maehren-Peterson. It was a huge consolation to have her with me. Our long-time friendship helped ease the anxiety. I can write words, but Patti's part in this journey just confirms to me that there are angels walking this earth as she was sent to me on purpose that day to help me through. God knew I needed my friend. We both knew what the results were going to be, but in her 'Patti' way, we still had some laughs and some way, somehow, we both got through the exam without totally breaking down.



Patti Peterson
LPN
ACMC Health



Tanya Smith
RN, CNP
ACMC Health

Aside from Patti, Tanya Smith, RN, CNP, was the first caregiver who went to great lengths to get this ball rolling. Tanya was the one who instructed Patti to arrange for the biopsy the initial day I entered the clinic. Tanya was very kind and displayed a very calm but urgent manner to put the situation into action. Tanya immediately made me feel comfortable with her swift action to make sure the next crucial step was in place.

Patti scheduled the biopsy to occur that same day. Lucky for me, the radiologist was at the clinic (which I consider huge as we didn't have to wait for another time). Things moved very quickly and my anxiety was fairly short-lived. Sometimes anticipation is worse than the procedure.

I had an incredibly brilliant radiologist who performed the biopsy with amazing skill. He was extremely calm and had a soothing bedside manner. I found the whole procedure very interesting as it was "ultrasound guided" and I was able to view the whole procedure on the screen. Each and every step was explained, and I was informed when each step was about to happen. The only discomfort I had were pre-biopsy jitters. Again, sometimes anticipation is worse than the procedure. Once the

procedure began, my full trust was in this amazing individual and his assistant. I felt completely relaxed.

Throughout this adventure, there was a network of incredible folks that I did not get to meet and greet. These are the people behind the scenes – the pathologists, lab techs, doctors and nurses – who each had their own share of tasks and consultations. I have no clue as to the many individuals (or their specific titles) who played a crucial role, but I do not want them to go unmentioned. I applaud these people for their skill and knowledge and thank them for applying their gifts to help me.

Waiting for results truly weighs on the human emotions. I was very fortunate, as it was only a couple of days before I got the call from my primary care giver, Priscilla Wilander, PA-C. Again, the situation was in fast-forward motion as Priscilla didn't waste a moment to get to the next step as quickly as possible. An appointment had already been set up by her to meet with a surgeon within days of receiving the results. A lumpectomy of the breast was going to be performed with removal of a couple of lymph nodes under my arm.



Priscilla Willander
PA-C
ACMC Health



Ryan Lussenden
MD
ACMC Health

I had the privilege of meeting a brilliantly gifted young gentleman who was going to perform my surgery – Dr. Ryan Lussenden. Along with his nurse, Beth Williams, Dr. Ryan helped immensely to ease the anxiety by his friendly, confident manner and skillful way of explaining what was going to happen. Both Dr. Ryan and Beth approached my case on a personal level, making it their goal to take care of me and not regard my case as another file to read through. It was very easy to place my trust in this gifted young surgeon from the moment he walked into the exam room – Dr. Ryan had me at hello!



Beth Williams
LPN
ACMC Health

I might also add, not only is Dr. Ryan an amazing surgeon, he also majored in music. Passion and compassion are heavy in both of these fields and I am extremely fortunate to have had this talented person in my life at a most crucial time. Dr. Ryan truly embraces his profession with passion and, is the epitome of what healing medicine is all about. I can only imagine to a small degree what Dr. Ryan needed to do to accomplish his surgical goal. The task of analyzing, diagnosing and assembling a team that fits the needs of each individual is way beyond my comprehension. This is everyday

devotion and dedication to the medical industry. I had the best of the best making a successful plan for me.

Surgery day did not just involve surgery alone. After checking into the clinic, I was given an injection into the breast of radioactive material which is a highly accurate “tracer” for mapping sentinel lymph nodes. I’m not a professional medical person, but this is an important step to assist in surgery. That’s probably all I needed to know.

After the injection, I was again greeted by my radiologist whose job was to perform an ultrasound-guided insertion of a wire locator – a road map, if you will, of the affected area. Again, sometimes anticipation is worse than the procedure. I already knew the gentle touch and incredible skill of this individual who completed the job with ease. An X-ray was taken to make sure the wire was positioned as expected.

Throughout each procedure, I was made very comfortable. Each and every injection was experienced with very minimal discomfort, if any at all. The skill exhibited by each person lessened any anxiety on my part. I regarded each procedure with intense interest, and was amazed at the phenomenal confidence of each of these professionals and their complete focus on their task at hand.

Shortly after the X-ray was completed, we left the clinic and checked in to Rice Memorial Hospital for the surgery. We were greeted by another friendly group, adding to our already growing medical team. From the woman at main registration to our discharge nurse, our day was filled with incredible folks who all played huge roles in prepping me for surgery.

Next, I was greeted by several people who had a part in the actual surgery. I regarded this as hugely important, as it put us all on a personal level. These people clearly embraced their jobs with enthusiasm and seemed to have a sense of joy for what they were about to accomplish. Some, I could see their whole face, while others already had their little blue masks on. However, each and every one of them had smiling eyes, which assured me I was in good hands.

Following surgery, I remained in recovery for a couple of hours, then I was sent home. My personal opinion on going home same-day is that recovery is so much more comfortable when a person can sleep and wake up in their own bed. I felt amazing the next morning and did not experience any post-surgical pain.



Lisa McBrian
Care Coordinator
Willmar Regional
Cancer Center

With surgery behind us, our next leg of this journey involved Willmar Regional Cancer Center. We were introduced to our Care Coordinator, Lisa McBrian, who brilliantly explained what had happened, what was currently happening, and what would happen next. Lisa assured us that, once again, we were going to be well taken care of. She presented facts and answered questions in a clear, concise manner. She was my go-to person. If something wasn't quite clear, or if I had a slight misunderstanding, Lisa insisted to call her anytime if I needed clarification.

Next, Lisa explained how a port would be surgically inserted so that chemo could be administered. She showed us what the port looked like and explained the surgical method. I was to be awake for the surgery, but again... sometimes anticipation is worse than the procedure.

Our next introduction was to our Onocologist, Dr. Joanne Monterroso, who would be another key player on our team. When I was told by this amazing person, "I have your back" and "I will take good care of you," again, I placed my full trust in the hands of this incredibly intelligent and caring individual. The detailed care Dr. Joanne took in studying my case assured me that whatever recommendation I was given for treatment would be acceptable without question. I trusted her beyond trust.

However, it was not a pleasant moment when chemo was recommended for my treatment. For those of us on the outside, and me in particular, the term chemotherapy immediately brought up negative images of the past. Such is not the case in most situations today. Once again, sometimes anticipation is worse than the



Joanne Monterroso
Oncologist
Willmar Regional
Cancer Center

procedure. Dr. Joanne's reassurance and encouragement gave me the confidence to move forward with the right attitude and let the medicine work its magic.

The port was surgically inserted at Rice Memorial Hospital on July 13, 2016 by another brilliant radiologist. This was not the same gentleman who had performed the biopsy or wire location, but another amazingly intelligent and skilled individual nonetheless. I was awake and given step-by-step instructions throughout the whole procedure. I was extremely comfortable and had no discomfort at all.

For the benefit of people who follow in my footsteps, each emotion is unique to each of us. Each event we face, and how we react to it, is up to each of us. For me, I felt good the day of chemo. I felt good throughout the infusing, and the next day I still felt good. My RN was incredibly skilled and had me up and running in very smooth and methodically planned steps. I was very comfortable throughout this time.

Prior to the chemo, during our consultation with Lisa and Dr. Joanne, we were given a plethora of information regarding the after-effects of chemo and what to prepare for. I was prescribed anti-nausea meds and was given advice to take them even at the slightest uncomfortable feeling. The most important advice was to walk off any feelings of fatigue. Personally, I stress walking

immediately in the morning to remedy the fatigue. It was very tempting to simply stay in bed, but for me, I needed to get up, get my bearings, and go out that front door to walk. The fatigue can be walked off. Several small meals and/or snacks throughout the day also helped to alleviate discomfort. I also recommend drinking plenty of water. Mostly, and I cannot stress this enough, do what you are told!

“This has truly been a memorable experience. One that has opened my eyes to the many facets in life that we take for granted.”

Day 4 Post-Chemo was when I first started to feel the effects of the chemo. Mild nausea began to set in and I took the meds as prescribed. For me, it was also very important to walk at this time... each and every morning. Once I hit Day 8 Post-Chemo, I felt good again, as well as each day after. As I write this, I am on Day 11. I still feel good, and I still have hair. I'm ready for the fall-out, should that happen, but if the upcoming chemo results affect me the same way as the first one, at least I know what to expect and what to do about the after effects.

This has truly been a memorable experience. One that has opened my eyes to the many facets in life that we take for granted. By being on the receiving end of news no one wants to hear, I gained a greater appreciation for those who have chosen a career in the medical field. Medicine has always been near and dear to my heart. These are folks who see the worst of the worst. They deliver news and do the very best they can to heal their patients, but there are those cases that do not have happy endings. Medical providers are

also human beings, and sometimes those endings seem beyond human emotion to bear. But because of their dedication and devotion to healing, they have inside each and every one of them a strength to help them endure the challenges they face. All of these people deserve recognition for the jobs they perform each and every day to keep us healthy. These heroes don't get big headlines and acknowledgement for their hard work. But, their hearts are in their work and they don't expect praise. In their humble manner, I know they would simply say, "We are just doing our job." I send a prayer for each of them that their burdens are light and each situation is successful. However, this is life and we do have the bitter with the sweet.

We are all given gifts in life. How we choose to use those gifts is up to each individual. I have been blessed to have individuals who demonstrated their gifts of healing on me, for which I will always be grateful. Thank you just doesn't say it all.

"If you or someone you know is faced with a medical affliction, be assured there are those gifted angels out there who are ready to take you under their wings."

Finally, this story can't come to an end without acknowledging my cheering squad. Once word got around, there was an overwhelming amount of response from family, friends and people who just wanted to send prayers and well wishes. My family was my strength in a sea of uncertainty, and without question, my main captain of this ship is Steve. This is as much his journey as mine. Each step of this adventure was taken by him as well. Sometimes I walked a little bit behind, and occasionally he had to pull me up and push me ahead. Many times I broke down and he helped me back up. When I fell apart, he put me back together. We are still moving ahead and looking forward to the celebration when this is all over and behind us.

Unfortunately, I am not the first case and I will not be the last. However, if there is one piece of advice I can pass on, it is this. If you or someone you know is faced with a medical affliction, be assured there are those gifted angels out there who are ready to take you under their wings and, as gently as they can, provide the best care humanly possible to get you back on that road to an enjoyable life. Remember, these folks chose this profession because of their dedication and love of healing.

In the meantime, may God bless you all with sunshine and blue skies. May you experience love and strength through life's challenges, and may each of you find something so funny each day that you pee a little just from laughing so hard!

Note: There are those whose names did not get mentioned but played a very important role in this journey and I apologize. Each and every one of you are very much appreciated and I thank you!