

The Pink Ribbon Girl

Tracie L. Metzger

Certain phrases I've heard over the course of my life have greatly affected me:

Treat others the way you'd like to be treated. Knowledge is power. Will you marry me? It's a boy, it's a girl... But none has affected me so much as the one I heard on September 8, 2000: You have cancer.

Lying in the recovery room after what was supposed to have been a routine lumpectomy, I tried to focus on Dr. Columbus as she walked in, but I couldn't because my contact lenses had come out before surgery. She moved slowly across the room and didn't say a word. She sat down next to me and held my hand.

"I'm so sorry Tracie, but the lump was malignant."

At first I couldn't remember if the word malignant was good or bad, but I found myself sobbing uncontrollably once I figured it out. My husband Ray walked into the room and he knew it wasn't good news. He looked at Dr. Columbus and said "Cancer?" She nodded. I was in the middle of a nightmare but somehow I was able to pull myself together to ask, "Okay, what now?"

Dr. Columbus explained that she would go back into my breast to remove any remaining cancer tissue and then sample some lymph nodes to make sure it hadn't spread. Ray was a resident physician at the time and asked all of the pertinent medical questions: "Who do you recommend for an oncologist? Will she need chemotherapy? What is the survival rate?" All I wanted to ask was, Am I going to die? Will I lose my breasts? Will I lose my hair?

Then the faces of my two children, Trey, age 3 and Grace, 11 months, entered my mind. How would I tell them? Was I going to be able to take care of them during all this? I was their Mommy and no one else could do the things I did for them. Dr. Columbus assured us that I was going to be fine and told me that, although it was uncommon, I was not the only 30-year-old breast cancer patient she'd treated.

Calling my parents to give them the news was one of the most difficult things I've ever done. Not only because of the nature of what I had just learned, but because my younger sister had given birth to her first son the night before. I planned on heading up to the maternity ward right after my procedure. But instead I found myself on the phone, struggling to get the words out. "Mom, it's breast cancer." To hear myself say those words out loud made it all too real for me. I guess I was holding out hope that Dr. Columbus had made a mistake and confused my results with the poor girl in the room next door. "Don't cry Mom," I said, "I'm going to be fine. I'll beat this." And as difficult as it was to tell her that I had cancer, I found those words came easily for me. I believe that it was the grace of God working through me and I would handle this through faith, strength and a positive attitude.

My oncologist, Dr. Randy Drosick, saved my life. Of course, as a doctor he helped save my body with chemotherapy, but as a person he had an even greater impact in helping me handle the emotional side of this diagnosis. His wife had been diagnosed with breast cancer six months earlier and I believe that experience gave him a unique perspective in the way he treated me. Unlike other oncologists, he was able to say things like "I know how you feel," and I knew that he did. As a father of two children himself, he offered insight, support and encouragement to Ray. I think Ray looked up to Dr. Drosick and could relate to him on several different levels—physician, father, and husband of a woman with breast cancer.

Over the course of the next couple of months I endured chemotherapy, lost all of my hair, and had plenty of bad days. One time, I remember walking into Dr. Drosick's waiting room and felt like every pair

of eyes was on me. Why wouldn't they be? I was at least twenty years younger than most of the patients in there. I asked Dr. Drosick if he had any other young patients I could talk to. The only women I knew with breast cancer were friends of my mom and they had been diagnosed in their fifties. Dealing with breast cancer while having kids still in diapers seemed a world apart from what these women were going through. I felt isolated and alone. I longed to talk to someone, anyone who could relate to the way I was feeling.

Not long after that, I caught a break. A friend of mine introduced me to Dawn Harvey, a woman close to my own age who had been diagnosed a month after me. Our first conversation was a bit awkward, mostly because we were complete strangers and were talking about breast cancer. But after a few phone calls, things went much smoother and I found reassurance and comfort in just hearing her voice. There was nothing like being able to talk to someone who knew exactly what I was going through. After several weeks we decided to meet.

I had started to look into the community for breast cancer support and found out there was going to be a meeting on Dawn's side of town. I asked her if she wanted to check it out with me and offered to pick her up. When she opened the front door I gave her a big hug. "It's so nice to finally meet you" I said. "You too," she said, "and I love your wig!" In the car we talked about anything and everything except our cancer, and we were both alright with that. I realized that cancer was just one part of who I was, it didn't define me.

The next few months seemed to go by so slowly. It was the middle of winter, the sky was always gray, and the cumulative effect of the chemotherapy was wearing me down. I was clinging to thoughts of spring and the end of my treatments. By then, I would be finished with eight rounds of it and ready to undergo my surgery for a double mastectomy. Dawn and I continued to get together every couple of weeks and relied on one another for moral support. We talked about how lucky we were to have found each other and wondered what other young women were doing for help and support.

Springtime came and having the chemotherapy behind me was a huge milestone. I was ready to find a "new normal" for my life. With each passing day, I could literally feel my body coming back to me. I know that sounds odd, but imagine for a minute that your body is getting belted with chemotherapy, every three weeks for six months, killing almost every fast growing cell in your body. Then all of a sudden it stops. My tired body was thanking me with each passing healthy day.

The further we got from the end of our treatments, the more Dawn and I talked about other young survivors. Our oncologists had given our names to a few women who had recently been diagnosed. When I talked to them I tried to offer some encouragement and advice, but most of all I just listened. It was strange in a way, having someone look to me for the answers to the same questions that I had myself just six months earlier. But I knew that I was helping them and found myself growing through those relationships.

During the summer months of that same year, Dawn and I gave serious thought to reaching other young women and developing some sort of support network. We knew we had the drive and desire to make it happen. We chose October, National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, to send out letters to our local papers and television stations. Almost everyone agreed to cover our story.

I got a phone call from Dawn on the night before our first interview. I could hear the excitement in her voice when she told me about a crazy dream she had the night before. "I dreamed we called ourselves Pink Ribbon Girls." For weeks, we had been racking our brains trying to come up with a name for our group. We wanted it to sum up who we were. Pink Ribbon Girls—it was perfect.

We had the first official Pink Ribbon Girls meeting at Wild Oats Cafe and seven women came. It warmed my heart to see this group of bald young women sitting around a table, drinking coffee, sharing some laughs, some tears, and everything in between. It was one of the proudest moments of my life.

The monthly meetings have continued over the past five years and our numbers continue to grow. Today there are over 350 Pink Ribbon Girls and we are a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization. Pink Ribbon Girls are young breast cancer survivors who are encouraged by their shared experiences to educate and inspire others to grow and live beyond breast cancer.

I am proud to say that my “new normal” has changed again. Since my diagnosis I have had two more healthy children, Hope and Jack. I am a woman who wears a different hat on any given day—carpool mom, PTA member, soccer coach, President of Pink Ribbon Girls. Each role has its own merits, one no more important than any other. My journey down this road has been a true blessing in my life. The people I’ve met, the knowledge I’ve gained, and the lives I’ve touched have made it all worthwhile. Today there is one phrase that impacts me more than any other: I AM A SURVIVOR.

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Tracie L. Metzger is the co-founder and President of Pink Ribbon Girls, a support network for young women diagnosed with breast cancer. She is active in the breast cancer community and was the first recipient of the “Patients of Courage Award” given by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons in 2003. She spends time speaking publicly about young women with breast cancer. She resides in Cincinnati, Ohio with her husband and four children.

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