

MY STORY

[REDACTED]
Diagnosed at age: 39
Date of Diagnosis: July 2017
Diagnosis: Metastatic Breast Cancer, Triple Negative

Finding Hope:

I was diagnosed with TNBC while pregnant with my second son. Being diagnosed while pregnant brought 'fight like a mother' to a whole new level. I have two beautiful sons to fight for, ages 4.5 and 17 months. Every day they are my inspiration. Every breath is for them. I know they need their mom and I need them, so each day, I lace up my shoes and do all the things I need to do - - even on the toughest days. I always feel better once I get moving. My biggest source of hope has been meeting other women ("thrivers") at the hospital, at local events and in support groups. I love hearing their stories about how they have overcome some of the biggest obstacles and are still here to tell their story and offer great advice. One woman in my group was diagnosed with Stage IV TNBC and has been twelve years in remission - even after brain and lung mets. I have her picture saved as my screensaver to prove to myself that there are plenty of success stories to focus on. It gives me so much hope! It's really amazing how many people are cheering you on from the sidelines. I am so lucky to have such a supportive army behind me, including my amazing husband, my siblings, mother-in-law, friends, local mom groups and even strangers wanting to see me beat this. I love to find ways to help other thrivers too. It brings me so much joy!

Facing Each Day:

The hardest part was not being able to fully be there for my two sons and that my life was no longer what I envisioned it would be. I had so many appointments that started just a week after giving birth: doctor visits, scans, port surgery, labs, pharmacy and genetic consults, etc. I also had to start chemo when my baby was only three-weeks-old. I had to discontinue breastfeeding and go through the painful process of allowing my milk to dry up, while navigating the side effects of IV chemo and sleep deprivation. I went through twenty-one weeks of chemo, surgery, PT and 5.5 weeks of radiation all before my son was even a year old. It was very tough, but so was I! Thankfully, I had a village of people wanting to help and that, in of itself, was amazing! They took so much pressure off of the daily tasks so we could focus on our kids, treatment and healing.

Less than a year from my initial diagnosis, I lost use of my left leg and ended up in the emergency room. The initial scans showed that my breast cancer metastasized to my brain. The heaviness of a stage 4 diagnosis with an infant and a toddler was harsh, but if I learned anything over the past year, it would be that our bodies are amazing and they can and will heal. Also, that I have so many people who love me and will do anything to see me succeed! I vowed that I wouldn't let it rob the joy from me or my family, and we would persevere through this like we have been doing. I am doing all sorts of therapies to heal my body and haven't given up any hope. I have been visualizing every aspect of my 100th birthday party, as that has always been a goal of mine, to live to be 100. I imagine what my family and friends will look like all old and gray, what the vegan chocolate cake will taste like and how lovely the lilacs on the table will smell. Our mind is so powerful and I really believe I survived some tough moments by envisioning positive outcomes.

My Encouragement to You:

The biggest things I can share are to stay positive and to accept help. I have found that keeping a positive attitude during the whole process is really beneficial. Not only does it help you, it also helps those around you too. It is OK and healthy to feel sad, so allow yourself to do that, but don't get stuck there. It is OK to grieve the person you were, but also embrace the person you have become. The inner strength you exude is amazing. You can do anything you put your mind to. Always remember that you are in control, even though sometimes it may not feel like it. Speak up for yourself if something doesn't feel right. There are amazing doctors and healthcare teams all around us, so don't settle for someone that you don't connect with. It is your body, your mind, and your life. You deserve the best! And accept that help! People are offering because they want to help and it makes them feel good to do so. Our families and friends sometimes feel helpless when they can't take our cancer and related issues away, so let them help in other ways. And my final word of advice is to eat lots of plants!

"Lend me your hope for awhile. A
time will come when I will heal and I
will lend my renewed hope to others"

- Eloise Cole

MY STORY

[REDACTED]
Diagnosed at age: 39
Date of Diagnosis: 2004
Diagnosis: Vaginal Cancer

Finding Hope:

I was diagnosed with vaginal cancer in 2004, at the age of 39. I was shocked to say the least. I quickly found out how rare this cancer was when my doctor had never treated anyone else with vaginal cancer. I searched for others to find support but found no one. I went through chemo and radiation with determination that if I survived, I would make sure there was something out there for others about vaginal cancer. I started a Facebook page and talked to anyone who would listen. I've had the privilege of walking through the journey with many women and that's what still gives me hope... knowing that I'm not alone and that together, we can help each other through some pretty awful times.

Facing Each Day:

Feeling isolated was the hardest part. I knew no one who had ever had vaginal cancer. No one goes around talking about their most private parts so that was also isolating. By accident I found out that some think of gynecological cancers as "dirty" or shameful. I was seeing my chiropractor one day and the receptionist said to me, "Yep, I know what you're going through. I had anal cancer. The sins of our youth will come back and get us, won't they?" I was stunned and asked her what she meant. She explained that being promiscuous had caused HPV which in turn cause OUR cancers! I told her that I had not been promiscuous and had never had HPV. From that moment on, I felt ashamed of something I'd never done and had not caused. Even if I would have had HPV, it still wouldn't be an excuse to be embarrassed about having cancer. I've since found many women in different support groups who deal with this daily. It's a shame, really. There is barely any awareness for cervical or ovarian cancer yet it attacks women of all ages. Cancers of the vulva, anus and vagina are even more rare and absolutely zero awareness. I wish I could bring more awareness so that women would know to be vigilant in their exams.

My Encouragement to You:

You are so much stronger than you think you are! You can do far more than you realize. You do not have to go through your journey alone!

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- Eloise Cole

MY STORY

[REDACTED]
Diagnosed at age: 41
Date of Diagnosis: January 2019
Diagnosis: Brain Cancer, Anaplastic Astrocytoma, Stage 3

Finding Hope:

On January 24, 2019, I was diagnosed with a tumor called Anaplastic Astrocytoma, a rare and aggressive type of brain cancer. I found out about this after having had a seizure in my apartment, which left me unconscious for two days. My friends found me because I hadn't been at work for two days, and they were concerned. I woke up in the hospital three days later, and that's when I found out I had cancer. I had surgery in March to remove the large tumor. While the doctor was able to remove most of the tumor, he could not get all of it because it was risky. So after surgery, I had radiation starting in July. At this time, I am on my fourth cycle of Temodar. The things that have brought me hope have been the support from my church and my family. I am just taking things one day at a time.

Facing Each Day:

The hardest part so far has been the fact that I now have a cognitive disorder. This means I forget things a lot (I usually write things down on my phone). As far as my memory - I don't remember what I did or ate yesterday. So now I have to write things down. And I am also on disability. It has been hard not having a routine, but I stay busy. I go to the YMCA -- I have joined a LiveStrong program there -- and I'm thinking about going back to college.

My Encouragement to You:

I would suggest getting informed; do your research and ask questions! Also, there are a lot of resources for support. For example, I got a lot of help from the America Brain Association; they gave me information that my oncologist then explained to me. I also reached out to the American Cancer Society, who connected me to someone who had the same tumor as mine. She and I have been in contact, and she gives me tips on what to do, what to expect, or what she went through. Make sure to ask your doctor a lot of questions, and if you don't understand, research on your own. Remember, you have a right to seek out a second opinion if you don't feel comfortable with something.

Try to make the best out of every day, and don't worry about the little stuff. If you feel you could use a therapist or psychologist, I do recommend that. It can help you understand what you are going through and take the stress off. I have a psychologist, and it did help. He told me: "You can't worry about things you can't control, you can only find solutions to things you can control." He also reminded me that it doesn't make any sense to worry about things you can't control in life. Just look at the other things you can control - like spending time with friends and family, and enjoying life - which I have done. Church has also been a big factor, along with my faith, in helping me stay strong. Finally, I want to add that nutrition is important. There are lots of foods that help make your brain stronger. Look online or buy a book, because diet can have a positive affect. Foods with high nutrients can help you heal faster. You can do this!

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