

When a Nurse Becomes a Two-Time Breast Cancer Patient

Kimberly Martinez | October 8, 2014

In honor of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, we approached two-time breast cancer survivor, Kimberly Martinez, to share her story as part of our Patient of the Month series. In order to help other patients, would you like to share your story about how cancer affects you or your family? Drop us a note at the bottom of the post.

My name is Kim Martinez. I am a nurse, a stay at home mom of three kids and a wife to a husband with a very busy position here in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Prior to my diagnosis, I was caring for my mother in Ohio, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in an advanced stage. Unfortunately, she was only 57 years old at the time of her diagnosis. Her cancer was too far advanced and had spread to her brain, and she passed away at 58 years of age. Ten months later, I was diagnosed with Stage II Triple Negative Left Breast Cancer. I was only 39 years old. It was devastating to have to go in and get a biopsy and be told right then and there, all by myself, that I had cancer. Thoughts of death and dying, thoughts of doctors, surgery, and who is going to take care of my kids, thoughts of how am I going to tell my kids, my family... we live out of state... we have no one here to help us... how are we going to do this... how are we going to afford this...how is my husband going to deal with this? We lost our son five years prior and I saw the sorrow on his face then, I couldn't bear to see the pain and suffering that we were going to have to endure now, let alone entertain the thought of him being a single dad.

I credit my mother for saving my life, because had it not been for her cancer, my doctor would have never ordered my mammogram. I was not yet 40 years old. However, the death of my mother was still very raw in everyone's hearts and now I had to share my worst fear: that it was now to be my journey. Watching my mother face this beast with such grace and dignity, I too knew exactly how I was going to handle my inevitable journey as well. I already knew that I would have a double mastectomy; I already knew that I would take chemotherapy and I had already accepted the idea that, if my physicians ordered radiation, that



Kimberly Martinez and her husband

too would be accepted with grace and dignity. I was a mother, wife, sister, aunt, friend, teacher – I was not going to let cancer beat me without a challenge. I also had put this entire challenge in God's hands. Whatever my outcome was going to be, it was going to be. So I taught my daughters how to be responsible young ladies at a very early age. They were only 13 and 12 and my son was only 6. They learned how to do laundry, how to cook, how to do basic housecleaning, and how to become more independent with their homework. These were skills they needed to learn anyway, why not now?

I have attempted to start my Master's program for Nursing Education! But I have quickly realized that now having 2 teenagers and a nearly 10 year old son, my life is not my own! Having been diagnosed at 39, and now 44, I have been truly Blessed to not only survive 20 rounds of chemo, breast cancer twice, 17 surgeries, and 34 rounds of radiation, I can now add one teenager through driver's education, and the second daughter in driver's ed. My health has taken many twists and turns and every time we think the cancer has returned. Many times it has been scary to see how sick I have gotten in such a short period of time. I have had to give up some things, like my pursuit of my Master's for right now, but I have to keep my eye on the goal. I have to stay healthy not only for me, but for my family, for my husband.

My husband and I had gotten a second opinion at the suggestion of our oncologist here in Ft. Wayne. I have to say that I was very blessed. My husband is a physician and so my team of doctors was all hand-picked by my husband. I felt well cared for, but also being a nurse, I knew what I needed to do. I knew what I needed to report. I knew what was normal and what was not. I knew to listen to my body. When I was tired—I took a nap, etc. Conversely, I knew very well the ugly side of cancer, steroids, chemo,

radiation and all that it brings. I was a pulmonary, ENT nurse at the Cleveland Clinic and took care of many cases of lung and head and neck cancer and saw many patients not survive chemotherapy. Knowing too much is sometimes not a good thing.



My team of doctors down at IU was very positive and supportive, but also very straight forward. They let me know that the kind of cancer I have is very aggressive and does not have a cure. I would also have a 10 year window to wait before I could be considered “cancer free.” My doctor went on to say that if my cancer was to return it would be within the next five years. As soon as my doctor had said that, I knew instantly in my gut, in my heart of hearts, that this cancer was going to return. I did not share that feeling with anyone, not my husband, any of my extended family, or any of my physicians. Everyone was already overly concerned; I certainly did not want to add to this. So, six months after my last chemotherapy, a lump began to grow out of my left breast again. My plastic surgeon thought it was some fat tissue not healing properly after the reconstruction and so we did a lumpectomy, only to find out that the cancer had indeed come back. It was the size of a walnut within 6 months. The cancer cells had survived all that chemo in the scar

tissue of the original biopsy site. Highly unusual for this to happen, but not unheard of. Thus, more surgery. Again, bear in mind, this cancer has no cure, so it became my choice to add four more rounds of chemotherapy. It was also now necessary to add the 34 rounds of radiation. There is/was no data as to whether this additional chemo would help or harm me, but – and this is a strong but – I did not want any regrets down the road of having this cancer come back stronger than ever. Those last 4 rounds were very trying. I knew what I was getting myself into. I knew how I would feel – this chemo plainly sucked. However, I did not want any “what if’s.”

As for the HealthWell Foundation entering into our lives, our first visit into my oncology’s office, we were sent to the billing/financial/insurance personnel in the office. She was the one who mentioned how we might apply for this grant. My husband’s company was shutting down. He was in a private practice, which was not surviving the economy and various other factors. Thus, we had to come up with hundreds of thousands of dollars to ‘close out’ his portion of the practice unbeknownst to us, and then my cancer struck. Needless to say, we were scared, we had no idea how this was all going to

work. This was a challenge on many levels that was way too big for me and my husband. I again prayed, and put my situation in God's hands.

Within a short period of time, answers to my husband's work situation had fallen into place and HealthWell Foundation had granted me money to ease the burden of at least my weekly copays. I never felt so relieved for just these small gifts in life, to know that there are these foundations and these individuals out there doing good to help others. Life is too hard and cancer makes it harder, and you should not have to worry about money as well.

So far, I am doing well. My cancer has not come back. I am challenged, it seems, with new health issues, but they are not life threatening. At 44 years of age, I can finally take a breath and start to feel like I have a future where I can see my now 18 year-old, 16 year-old and nine year-old grow up and become responsible productive citizens. I am far too busy to think about cancer, but the sad truth is, it's never too far from my thoughts, especially when I don't feel well. It is hard not to panic or think, "what is that?" when I have that headache – remember, I lost my mother to metastatic brain cancer. However, my kids, my husband, and my friends keep me busy, they keep me smiling and my faith keeps strong. I look forward to a long life. I'm enjoying college hunting right now with my daughters, watching them become even more independent young ladies, all the sports events with my son, the idea of someday being a grandma, retirement with my husband (although these are both a long way off) and yet taking every day to enjoy my family, no matter how frustrating or tiring it is! Thank You HealthWell!

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