

## Carrie Trotter – My Breast Cancer Story

January 8<sup>th</sup> of this year I was sitting at my desk and randomly leaned back in my chair and swiped my hands over the sides of my breasts. A random act – not intentionally touching my breasts – but more of a stretch. And there I felt it – a lump in my left breast – about the size of a pea. I didn't think much about it – I thought "breast cancer doesn't run in my family – no way is it anything like that" plus I had mammograms every year (the most recent in September). Over the next few days it would pop back in my head and I would feel again – at that point sometimes I could find it easily and other times I couldn't feel it at all so again I didn't think much of it. Late the following week I had a type of respiratory infection so I thought it best to call the doctor. I went to see the doctor January 22<sup>nd</sup> for the respiratory infection and mentioned the lump. She felt for it and didn't think it was anything but suggested I go for a 3D mammogram.

February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2 weeks later was when I was able to get in for the 3D mammo. The doctor didn't think it was anything so didn't put a rush on it. A soccer-mom friend was doing the mammo and said normally when you find a lump they also do an ultrasound. Because she knew me, she went ahead and scheduled me for the ultrasound. Don't let those techs fool you – they aren't supposed to tell you – but they know what's up. I could tell by the look on my friend's face that it wasn't very good news. She said "you will need a biopsy".

Things move a lot faster once the C word is uttered.

February 8<sup>th</sup> I had a needle biopsy of two spots in my left breast. February 13<sup>th</sup> I was given the official diagnosis of breast cancer from my regular physician and referred to an oncologist.

My immediate reaction was okay – let's get it out and move on with life. I was told it was small, caught early, etc. I thought I'd have a little surgery, be done by end of March and move on with life. HA! Little did I know what I was in store for.

Doctors, Surgeons, Blood Work, Second Opinions, firing one oncologist (long story), finding a new oncologist, more blood work, MRI, genetic testing, more doctors, more blood work. I saw more doctors from Feb 13 – March 13 than I've ever seen in my life. My head spun in absolute disbelief and denial. NO WAY could this be happening to me. Heck – I'm the healthiest I've been in ages. Lost a few pounds, working out regularly – feeling great! HA!

Good news! I didn't have the BRCA (pronounced Braca) gene mutation (think Angelina Jolie) – I get to keep my ovaries! Bad news: they found a total of 3 spots in my left breast which means doing a lumpectomy is out unless I wanted a totally mutilated breast.

Decisions, decisions, decisions. They tell you that you have time to make them but you hear this rather loud clock ticking and you just want this junk OUT! Sign me up, do what you have to do, just get it OUT!

Good news! They said..."it was caught early and hopefully hasn't spread. We'll know more during surgery". Bad news: it's an aggressive form and you have to have chemo. We'll know after surgery if you need radiation.

Every day it felt like a new revelation with disappointing news. I'd have my hopes up only to be knocked down again.

Other than having my wisdom teeth removed (which I don't think counts) I've never had surgery in my life. My husband Tom and I decided I should have a double mastectomy to reduce the chance of having to do a second surgery should the cancer come back in the other breast. I debated on reconstruction but decided in the end to stay flat. Again, reducing the number of surgeries. I'm also a pretty plain-Jane kind of person. I couldn't imagine anything 'fake' in me.

March 13 – double mastectomy surgery. Good news – it had not spread to the lymph nodes so I didn't have to have radiation. Bad news – the tumors had grown and the tumor board decided to stage them together so they upped me from a Stage 1A to Stage 2B – meaning I would need extra chemo.

My cancer was Triple Positive – Positive for Estrogen, Progesterone & HER2. HER2 is a protein that promotes the growth of cancer cells. HER2 makes my cancer VERY aggressive. Thank God for modern medicine there is a drug today to treat it. If I had this cancer 12 years ago my outlook would not be as positive as it is.

I completed 6 rounds of chemo from April 30 until August 12. It was not pretty and my understanding is I tolerated it better than many. I am now continuing targeted treatment until end of April next year. I go for an infusion every three weeks. This is the drug that targets the HER2 protein.

The oncologist tells me I am considered in complete remission. I'm hesitant. There is no test that tells us that what I've been through has removed all the cancer. Every time I see her I ask 'can we do a PET scan?, can we do an MRI?, can we do blood work?' and she says those would be a waste. And I ask "then how do we know if all of this has worked", and she says "time". So I just have to wait and see. The chance of reoccurrence after surgery was 30%. The chance after chemo is 10%. The chance of reoccurrence after 5 years drops to 2-3%.

(we'll be having a BIG party in 5 years)

I used to think I was aware of breast cancer but I was not. I guess like many situations in life you don't know the reality until you have to walk the path. There are many types and treatments of breast cancer and while many are similar no two seem to be the same.

With all of that said I am beyond blessed. Tom is my rock and #1 supporter. He has been there for me no matter what. The emotional toll this disease takes is challenging to say the least and will continue to be always.

Nothing is the same.

But I have so many supporters including a group of WCR sisters who have been there for me through this all. My tribe ROCKS!

We all know someone going through a trauma such as cancer. And if you are like me you often wonder what to say or do and how to best support these friends. Well having been there/done that I can tell you that your good thoughts, prayers, notes, cards, texts, phone calls, invites and visits are very appreciated. The best words are simply, "I'm sorry you are going through this" or "I'm bringing soup over do you want me to leave it on the porch". The most poignant, thoughtful thing someone said to me was 'You will be loved through this' – and she is right. I feel the love every day.

I could go on-and-on and am happy to answer questions. But I would like to leave you with two items:

1. October is National Breast Cancer Awareness month. Which is fabulous but we need to move beyond pink and just awareness. Everybody is aware. We need to move to research, prevention & treatment. As always - please be mindful of where your donation dollars go.
2. Breasts do not define the woman. The reconstruction decision is one that all mastectomy patients face, and we need ALL of our options clearly laid out so that we can make the choice that's right for us. Right now, too often, going flat is either trivialized or not mentioned at all. The INAUGURAL "International FLAT Day" will be celebrated on Monday, October 7<sup>th</sup>.

**Save the Women – Not the Tata's.**