

My Cancer Story

Kristen Barry, age 52

I succumbed to death after being bitten by a poisonous snake. I suffered a massive heart attack and never recovered. I was among the 274 passengers found among the plane wreckage on the side of a mountain. My parachute never opened and I fell to my untimely death. I perished in a terrible car wreck. These are all ways that I had envisioned dying in the past, but dying from breast cancer had never once entered my mind. I had no family history of breast cancer, was fit and athletic, never smoked, and was the president of the IBTC (itty-bitty-titty-committee) in high school. Breast cancer would NOT be on my list of 100 ways I was going to die.

At the age of 43 I felt something. Not a pain or a twinge that comes with middle age whispering in your ear that you are no longer as young and vital as you use to be. It was a lump, something foreign, something that shouldn't be there. I had a mammogram each year starting at the age of 40 as I was instructed. I was told I was fine each year. I didn't ignore my health. I didn't "choose" to get sick. No one I know wakes up and thinks it would be a great idea to start the day by contracting a life-threatening disease. In fact, "complete shock" would be a mild term to describe how I felt when the results came back and I was told (over the phone by the way) that I had cancer.

My actual life plan had looked more like this. Earn a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology by the age of 25, help abused, less fortunate, and special needs kids, make decent money (okay I was hoping for boatloads of money...who doesn't), and retire at an early age in order to travel the globe, my ultimate dream! My dreams were coming to fruition. I did complete my Ph.D. by the age of 25. I had worked with some of the most traumatized children and teenagers across inpatient, residential, and outpatient settings. I got married to a wonderful husband and had two amazing daughters. In 2011 our family had just relocated to sunny Florida from upstate New York as the cold, grey weather was something that we were growing tired of. I was happy.

Then my plans were derailed in an instant. Out poured the tears, the "why me" moments, the fears. I heard from others that this would be a "bump in the road" and that I would be "back to normal in no time" and the doctors told me that I would be "cured" as long as I complied with all their treatments. I wanted to have faith, to believe each positive statement, and to have the strength to endure what lied ahead. Every routine act that I had anticipated each morning in the past was gone, changed forever, and my new "normal" became meeting with doctors, dealing with bills and insurance claims, and spending hours researching.

What was supposed to be one "routine" surgery, turned into six grueling surgeries over the course of 25 months, leaving me with 45 inches of scars. I spent months trying to recover from wounds that wouldn't heal. Two of my surgeries took place out of state and away from my children. Chemotherapy was more brutal to my body than I ever imaged. I suffered rare side effects that were not expected, by myself or even my doctors. I experienced Sudden Sensorineural Hearing Loss, going completely deaf in my right ear. Was diagnosed with osteoporosis, permanent nerve damage, severe blood count deficiencies, a gene mutation, edema and lymphedema, and more! Radiation daily for six weeks made my skin burn and my body become weaker. The fatigue grew deeper to the point where walking to the mailbox at the end of the short driveway and even walking from the living room to the bathroom became a chore. Depression, anxiety, fear, and hopelessness crept in. The litany of side effects,

emotional and physical battles and financial stress began to engulf me. I couldn't continue to let the cancer and the aftermath of treatments dictate the direction of my life.

I joined the Young Survival Coalition support group. Attending conferences across the country and meeting other survivors became therapeutic. I quickly realized that helping others was what would help me. I started blogging about my diagnosis and lifestyle changes. Posting healthy recipes, sharing changes I was making in my diet and lifestyle (completing my first half marathon at 52). Discussing supplements, herbs, oils, and other natural, non-toxic ways to heal the body. Living a clean lifestyle, sharing my knowledge and helping others became my obsession.

I volunteered and led a support group through a local non-profit cancer agency for several years. I founded a chapter of the International non-profit support group Healing Strong. Connecting with others, researching, and arming myself with knowledge made giving up NOT an option. I loved the online connections and the volunteer work but I craved to do even more to help women. I wanted to help in the prevention of breast cancer not simply helping to cope after a diagnosis. I opened a thermography practice in 2018 helping women to be proactive with their breast health. With each woman I meet my passion for helping grows stronger and stronger. While the fear of death had haunted my every breath in the past, I now look forward to each day with faith, love and hope. Cancer provided me with a new purpose, a new outlook on life, a new mission.