

My Experience with Cancer – Hitting Home

My Mom, Lisa, was diagnosed with colon cancer in October 2006. She was experiencing abdominal pain and went in for an emergency appendectomy when the surgeons found a mass annexed to her colon. This was quite disturbing since I have three aunts that have had breast cancer. Two are survivors and the other passed away, so I was extremely upset and unsure as to what to expect.

I remember the day my mom came home from the hospital and she and my dad called me and my brothers into the kitchen that afternoon. Normally, we have dinner together a little later, so I was curious why we were meeting earlier than usual. I knew something was wrong. She and my father tried to explain simply and carefully without causing me and my brothers to be alarmed. She explained that she would need to have chemotherapy treatments and may experience some side effects from the treatment such as nausea, vomiting, loss of her hair and fatigue. My first thoughts were what were my brothers, Nicholas and James, thinking. James was only seven, just barely old enough to understand. My older brother, Nick was fifteen and a little harder to read. Finally, I thought about my feelings. I was worried, saddened, frightened and mostly overwhelmed. I began to cry, my head and heart were in a whirlwind. We all comforted each other and tried to understand what was happening. I didn't know the rush of emotions that were ahead of me the next four years.

The first time my mom came home from treatment I was taken aback. I didn't think she would be so sick. It was difficult watching her get sick after her treatment but she bounced back in a couple of days. I felt a role reversal. I wanted to care of my younger brother and felt obligated to help around the house more. It was hard seeing someone I looked up to, my hero, be worn down.

School was a completely different world. I tried hard to keep up my grades and study and surprisingly, I was able to accomplish this task. However, my friendships took the opposite path. On any particular day, I would take out the negativity of my feelings and attitude on my friends or sometimes just kept to myself without saying a word. I couldn't bring myself to share with them what was going on in my life. Perhaps I handled myself in this manner because I didn't want to accept the reality of the situation. At some point, I met with Ms. Hack, a social worker at the middle school I was attending. She helped me cope and eventually I told my friends. After six months of treatment, my mom went into remission. They couldn't detect any signs of cancer in her body so the chemo was working. I was relieved but that would soon change.

About a year later the cancer had returned. This time I fell apart a little more. I was in eighth grade at the time and I was applying to Catholic high schools, striving away from my public school education to try something new.

This time around, in addition to the previous side effects, her hair also fell out and she decided to buy a wig, which I actually helped her pick out. I was angry and I couldn't grasp why my Mom had cancer again. I questioned why God put this burden upon us? My Mom is a strong believer that God gives you what you can handle and she will do the best she can to combat this disease. I had adjusted to her going for treatment when she suggested that perhaps I'd like to go to a support group at Gilda's. This is when I began attending Tween Group at Gilda's Club Westchester. It felt safe to go there -- where people knew what was going on and I could relate to the other girls in the group. The girls in the group quickly became my friends. I was never once skeptical about joining the group. I also found out about the Youth Committee at Gilda's and was asked to join. I get to help other people affected by cancer, cancer survivors, friends and families, people both young and old.

Last March, my Mom's cancer had spread once again and her oncologists in White Plains recommended her to a surgeon in Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. She had major surgery in March and wasn't home for awhile which was odd for me and the family. I visited her twice in the hospital because I missed her but at the same time I was frightened to see her weak. Although we still ate together, things weren't quite the same and the meals weren't as good as the way she cooked.

At that point, I was so grateful for having an amazing support system. I told my guidance counselor, Ms. Riv, about what I was experiencing and the school even had a prayer intention for my Mom. In order to raise funds for Gilda's Club Westchester, I held an awareness day at the school. I wanted to give back to the place that helped me and show my appreciation.

Upon my Mom's return home, it took her nearly 3 months to recover. We had planned to go on a trip to Europe that summer but, needless to say, we had to cancel. I was angry but later regretted being so selfish.

Although my Mom's cancer was affecting me it was also affecting the rest of my family. My older brother was away at college and I'm sure he was upset and concerned. My Dad, who had always been strong, had started drinking as an escape. Even though I don't know how my Mom's cancer was making him change, seeing him drink made me miserable. I hated when he didn't come home after work. It just made the load heavier. When he did come home it was even worse seeing him stumbling. I went to a therapist to discuss my problems. I felt alone and I was sure there were other girls dealing with the same difficulties I was experiencing, I just never thought it would happen to me.

Today, my mom is doing well. We are planning to go to Paris and London this summer for my sixteenth birthday. My experience with cancer was unique as is everyone's. It has changed my personality and made me mature at a quick pace. I've grown stronger and realize sometimes life isn't fair. Gilda's has played a crucial role in my experience with cancer. I was able to take my negative energy and use it to deal with emotions in a positive way.

My mother is my best friend and will always be that and so much more. She is the strongest person I know and I continue to look up to her and her courage.

I continue to attend Gilda's Club and will probably never stop because I enjoy the people I have met there, Roni Miller, the 'tween moderator, Jen Scully and all the others who are a part of such a unique community. I take pleasure in being a member of the Youth Committee and enjoy sharing with others and organizing the events. It's truly amazing what cancer has taught me.