

Donna Vertefeuille

You never know where journeys might take you and this one was no exception. I was hired on with Atrium Windows & Doors in October 2014 as a Staffing Specialist. In November, our office nurse scheduled the Novant Health Mammogram bus to come out to the employees in Welcome. I signed up, had my mammogram and the next day was called to schedule another appointment because they saw something unusual. Once another mammogram was done, the doctor indicated several spots on my right breast and wanted to do a biopsy. The biopsy was scheduled just before Christmas. Once the results came back after Christmas I was asked to come into the office. When my husband and I went to the office I still didn't think that I had breast cancer. I was told that I had two different cancers, one dormant and one aggressive. Guess I should have known that I might have cancer when they asked me to have someone come with me!

Hearing the words, you have breast cancer is quite a numbing feeling. I cried that night and then decided it was time to go to work! Surgery was scheduled for February. I needed to wait until my health insurance kicked in. I chose to have a lumpectomy with one lymph node removed and shortly after healing started, my port was placed in order to start chemo. Almost immediately, I started having LOTS of fluid building up in my right breast. I ended up going to my surgeon 3 different times to have the fluid drawn out.

I was scheduled for 6 chemo treatments. I was determined to continue working throughout this process and I did. My first treatment was on a Thursday in March (deciding that would be the best day towards the end of the week). It had been decided that my Mom and Dad would be the ones taking me to treatment. They were retired and I needed my husband to continue to work. My parents were the best to stay with me during treatments, change their schedule at a moment's notice, and check on me daily as I got sick. The week after chemo was the worst. The nausea and diarrhea was tough. I stayed sick the entire time. I never knew when to expect getting sick – no notice given! I had a white, 5-gallon bucket that travelled with me from one room to another for almost two years. I also had a smaller bucket in the car which was also used from time to time while I was driving. Trying to find something I could keep in my system was very difficult – both food and drink. And, it changed each month that I had the chemo so we had to start over trying different things to eat and drink.

After my fourth treatment, I got really sick; not being able to keep anything down at all. I became dehydrated and started running a fever. We decided it was time to go to the hospital when I could hardly walk. My husband took me to Forsyth Medical Center. They immediately took me through and admitted me with severe dehydration and severe weakness. I was at the hospital almost a week and then came home to recuperate. After begging to be able to go back to work, I was told I could work half days and rest half days and that's what I did. On the 2nd day after getting out of the hospital I decided to go out onto our back patio. It has five steps and railings. I made it to the last step and my legs gave out due to weakness and brittle bones from the chemo. I fell one step. I looked at my left foot and knew I was in trouble when it was turned the opposite way (of course, broken). I yelled for my husband to come outside and when he did he started panicking about what to do. He asked where I wanted to go and since I had just left Forsyth Medical several days earlier I thought that was the smartest choice. My husband drove my car around back and with the help of my step-daughter, son-in-law, and my husband they got me in the back seat. That was easy compared to getting me out. It took a while but the techs at the hospital finally succeeded. Once they got me out of the car, I knew something

was wrong with my right ankle too. Yep, it was broken also. After the maximum amount of morphine to try to reset my ankles, it was determined that I would need to have surgery the next day to put a plate and screws in my left ankle. That didn't happen though because I had scraped my left ankle and they wanted it to heal before doing surgery and covering it. SEVERAL weeks later I finally had surgery. The doctor decided that since the right did not completely break in two it would be ok not to have surgery. Of course, during this time no chemo was allowed. I transferred over to Whitaker Center, which is part of Forsyth Memorial, after 1 month. A lot of pleading with doctors and staff was done to allow me to stay at Whitaker. Everyone there was wonderful and worked very hard with me in physical therapy. I literally had to learn to walk again. I used a wheelchair for 2 months, then a walker for over a month until I was able to go back to work in September and then shortly after going back to work I started using a cane.

My insurance would not allow me to stay there the entire time so I was transferred to Bryan Center in Lexington. Bryan Center was more of a nursing home, though they did have a physical therapy room. During this time, my hair started growing back which was exciting (but not for long). I really had to push the therapists there to give me what I needed. You reach a point where you have to be the voice and advocate for yourself or you may get overlooked which was my case. I was not happy at all in Bryan Center so I pushed to get out as quickly as possible. Three days after coming to Bryan Center I developed a bacterial infection in my right breast. My husband had to take me once a week back to my surgeon to have it drained. This went on for four weeks.

My insurance was about to run out at the 90 day mark and I knew this process had to move very quickly. I gave them the time of when I needed to get out of there and stuck to it. It's amazing what you can do when you have to! I left on walker on Friday and was back to work on Monday. It was a struggle but my company was so awesome in helping me and being there during the whole process.

Now, it was time for chemo to resume. I had two more "bad" chemo treatments left. After the fifth chemo, I lost my hair again. In November, I was ready to start radiation. I had 33 treatments and finished up in February but continued one with Herceptin with my last treatment being July 1. In May, I got bronchitis which quickly developed into pneumonia. I had a recheck with my surgeon on a Friday. He immediately sent me over to the Cancer Center to be checked out. I was then escorted into the emergency room, of course, via wheelchair and admitted for a long weekend. While getting a CT scan there was a spot found on my liver. An MRI was done and it was decided that another AMIR would be done in September to compare the two. This showed the same size and no change from the last, so for now, we are saying it's just a lesion and nothing to be worried about.

Once I finished my treatment on July 1, I started getting very emotional. I kept saying "Now what?". After having doctors, nurses, nurse navigators taking care of you, realization hits that you are on your own (less doctor's appointments, no treatments, etc.) I felt very selfish for feeling this way. On my last treatment one of the nurse navigators gave me a session of classes to help deal with lots of things. It's called Cancer Transitions through the United Way – a four week class on finances, emotions, nutritional cooking and exercise. This helped me tremendously with my emotions. I feel that they more you can talk about your journey, the easier it is to deal with. I've gone through physical therapy for lymphedema in my right arm. I still don't walk the greatest and the doctor said I probably never would – but I'm walking and I'm alive!

I've learned several things since November, 2014:

1. Make sure that you go regularly for your mammogram. I would not have gone when I did had it not been for the Novant Health Mammogram Bus. Since I'd just started a new job I would not have taken time off to go. I'm so glad that I went to work at Atrium and the bus was offered as a free service to our employees.
2. Give your family a hug and tell them you love them often. My family was a major support for me during this journey. My mom and dad took me to all treatments. My mom and I talked at least 3 times a day, even if it meant I couldn't talk because of nausea she would then talk to me. I could not have done it without them. My husband cleaned up after me on numerous occasions after being sick and tried fixing things I could eat. He kept up with all the housework so didn't have to do anything but rest. He was there for me throughout and could not have made it without him.
3. God has a plan for me. I never asked "Why me?". He knew the reason and saw me through the whole journey.
4. Support of others is very important. Whether it be friends/family coming to check on me or the many prayer lists that I was on. It made a difference.
5. Know that emotions are ok and that it will get better. I discovered that the more I involve myself with volunteer ventures the more it helps dealing with it all. It's ok to be concerned when something starts hurting or you don't feel exactly right. That's normal.
6. I have a story to tell and I want others to hear that even with setbacks, you can get through this and come out stronger than before.
7. Live for the moment and be happy with where you are in life. Not everyone is as fortunate.