

Patty Sullivan

In September of 2010, I was called back for a repeat mammogram. After reviewing the second mammogram, the radiologist felt there was nothing to worry about, but suggested I might want to consider having an MRI due to my dense tissue and sister's history of breast cancer. However, nothing else was said about this suggestion and I simply continued with my annual mammogram through 2015, each one coming back normal. When I received the normal report in the mail following my January 2015 mammogram, I took note of the density report stating I have very dense tissue, which makes it difficult to see the breast tissue clearly. After Googling more detailed information about dense breast tissue, I found several recommendations for women with my family history and tissue density, to have an MRI in order to get a better look, just like the radiologist had mentioned to me nearly five years earlier.

While trying to decide if I should pursue the MRI or not, I just happened to have my yearly dermatology appointment. While at the appointment, I asked my provider as to whether or not she felt I should talk to my family doctor about scheduling a breast MRI. Much to my surprise, it didn't take her long to say she thought I should get the test completed. I have to say, I was pretty shocked and really didn't know what to do next. She told me to call up my doctor and ask her for a consultation visit. With offices across the street from each other, I left the dermatologist's office and walked right over to my doctor's office while I still had my nerve. They got me back to see the doctor in about 15 minutes, which was pretty amazing. When the doctor walked into the room she had such a confused look on her face wondering why I was suddenly interested in discussing further testing after my clean mammogram report. I explained my rationale and asked her to look back at my mammogram report from 2010, where the radiologist suggested I should consider having an MRI. I don't think the doctor was still convinced of the necessity of the MRI, but she said she would be happy to order it for me if I wanted her to. After receiving approval from the insurance company, I had the MRI 7 weeks after my annual mammogram.

Upon my arrival at the MRI center on March 23, 2015, I was greeted with "that will be \$1500, please" to cover the deductible for my insurance. I was floored; I was not prepared to pay that amount, especially for a test that I requested and I assumed would come back normal. I can't tell you how close I came to walking out of the office and canceling the test. Fortunately, I was too embarrassed to actually get up and leave, so the MRI was completed.

The day following the MRI, I received that gut wrenching phone call from my doctor's office that a mass was found in my right breast, in the upper right quadrant and an ultra sound needed to be scheduled along with a possible biopsy. I couldn't believe what I was hearing and I was a wreck. The unknown is so unbelievably scary. You can pretty much convince yourself of anything, and I was convinced this was the beginning of the end, and I should just kiss my family goodbye. And to add to my own head game, was the waiting game for appointments and test results. Things seemed to move slow, I just wanted answers. Sleepless nights and no appetite were taking over as I waited to see the radiologist. My sister, also a breast cancer survivor of 7 years, did her best to answer questions for me, and provide me with a list of questions that I needed to ask, and Sherrie Tate, Randolph Cancer Center's breast navigator told me, "Patty, this is the hardest part; the unknown. Once we know what we are dealing with and can make a plan, I promise things will get easier." Sherrie was right. After the horrific news of the breast cancer diagnosis, I was told this was caught very early, and my surgeon even went as

far as telling me “you have a wimpy cancer”. Every test from that point forward provided results in my favor. I knew then that I was going to be just fine.

Following surgery and 21 days of radiation, I am now happy to say I am cancer free. My husband Kurt, my three boys, Korey, Ryan and Patrick, and daughter-in-law, Allyson have been beside me this entire journey. The six of us adopted a quote by Helen Keller to keep us positive during my treatments and for the future: “Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement.” It is by the Grace of god and early detection, that I am able to say I have achieved a clean bill of health and an awareness that I am stronger than I ever imagined; there truly are worse things than a breast cancer diagnosis.

It still amazes me at times that this all started after I pursued the MRI. Call it a hunch, divine intervention or just plain luck (I prefer to call it divine intervention) that the test was completed, but I can't help but think where I would be today had I not done anything and simply waited for my annual mammogram to roll around in 2016.

Breast cancer is an insidious disease that can strike any woman at any time, but it is not a death sentence. Early detection saves lives, and I am living proof. I have always heard God puts us here for a reason, but it wasn't until breast cancer changed my life 19 months ago, that I found my reason. I am now working hard in a number of ways to support early detection and by encouraging all women to get their annual mammogram screenings when cancer can be found at its very earliest stage.

Thank you all for allowing me to briefly tell my story, and thank you God for early detection.