



Just One of the Crowd

By Diane McNiff

Diane McNiff is a retired insurance administrator and pre-K teacher. She is the proud mother of two and the grandmother of one. Her interests include reading, writing, painting, and living in the moment with family and friends. She recently celebrated her 70th birthday and always tells people she is very proud of every gray hair and wrinkle that she has.

Early on in my venture with immunotherapy, I was often told how remarkable my response was, and this made me feel unique. Now that I am in survivorship, I'm pleased to say I feel like I am one of a growing number of people who had a positive response to immunotherapy treatment. I'm no longer unique, just one of the crowd – and that's a powerful testament to how far we are progressing.

My story begins in December 2012, when I began experiencing pain in my side. I went to my primary care physician to have it checked out. When he called me back to his office, it was to tell me that I had cancer. He suggested that I get my affairs in order and told me it was OK to be angry or cry. But I thought, What good would that do? My job was to put one foot in front of the other, share this news with my family, and get moving. I have a small family: my daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter; my son; and my brother. Their response was totally supportive. Someone was always with me for my appointments.

My doctor sent me to Memorial Sloan Kettering, where I was

diagnosed with stage IV metastatic lung cancer that had spread to my bones, pancreas, and parotid gland. The prognosis was grim, but we began chemotherapy. Six months, three different cycles – none of which worked. I lost my hair, my weight dropped to 80 pounds, and the only time I left my house was to go to my medical appointments.

As a last resort, in June 2013, I was offered a clinical trial in immunotherapy. At first we weren't sure if I was strong enough to participate, but it began to work, and with each passing scan my tumors shrank, my hair grew back, I gained weight, and my energy returned.

The treatment continued for 22 months. During that time I was able to do things I thought I would never do again. But in May 2015, the tumors in my lungs began to grow. We were devastated. I was taken off the clinical trial and, at the suggestion of my oncologist, underwent lung surgery to have two lobes removed. Recovery went well but was not without its challenges. I was put back on immunotherapy again, and right now, things seem to be looking good. I'm having some issues with joint and muscle pain that we are trying to control with medication, but surely this is manageable.

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Do you exercise regularly and/or follow a special diet?

Being a cancer survivor in general forces certain lifestyle changes and routines, but those were the very things that helped everyone involved with my care find a way to help me live the most normal life possible. I struggled during adolescence with depression and feeling as if I would never be able to have a family of my own. But I met my wonderful wife and we have since adopted our wonderful children. My mother helped set the blueprint with my diet and exercise routines and then taught my wife how to care for me as well. This has been an ongoing struggle, but we work well as a team. The goal is to live a long and healthy life.

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When my cancer journey began, it was questionable if I would make it to the next holiday. But since then I have seen my daughter marry and my son graduate college and watched my beautiful granddaughter grow. My family, friends, and in particular my two best friends from college have been there every step of the way. I am so blessed in that respect. Being treated at MSK has also been a blessing. My wonderful oncologist — who practically bounces into the room when my scan results are good — and the nurses who care for me are truly remarkable.

As foolish as it may sound, I often think about how grateful I am to be on this journey. Cancer gives you such a profound appreciation for life and all the beauty and goodness in this world. Again, I find it surprising that many others who travel this road experience similar feelings; I'm not unique, just one of a crowd.

I just celebrated my 70th birthday with my family and a few friends at a small restaurant that I am fond of. At some points I didn't think that would ever happen. Call it outstanding medical care or call it a miracle — whatever you call it, I'm still here!

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June 6 was my scheduled operation day, two days before my son graduated as valedictorian of his elementary school. Although I wasn't able to attend graduation, the surgeon was able to remove the multiple tumors he found, leaving the jaw intact.

The 80 pounds I lost, the flaccid skin and muscle, and the stitches all over are testimony to this portion of my story. But I am alive and well and cancer free. It has been a long, emotional journey, and I made it. The cancer is gone, but the road ahead is still long and challenging.

As I write this, I have a month and a week to get ready for my wedding. I'm looking forward to returning to school and teaching, and many, many years of joy with my family. See, my story still continues — even beyond cancer.

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