





FORWARD

Facing

One breast cancer survivor's journey
 where she learned **attitude is everything**
 and healed her battle wounds by helping others



BY PAUL NICOLAUS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHANE VAN BOXTEL, IMAGE STUDIOS

Janice Zuege exudes positivity. Her zest for life seems to perpetually propel her ahead.

Picture bicycle tires circling round and round, a kayak maneuvering through clear waters, a pair of skis gliding across freshly fallen powder. Her passion is getting out and getting active, often times with Roy, who has hiked the Grand Canyon twice with his wife of nearly 30 years. But two years ago, all that forward momentum came screeching to a halt.

"I felt like a freight train hit me," she recalls, voice quivering with emotion.

It had been 10 years since her first bout with breast cancer in 2003. A lumpectomy, six weeks of daily radiation, five years of Tamoxifen, and regular check-ups finally gave way to a sense of normalcy.

The former teacher and long-time associate principal of Hortonville Elementary and Middle Schools felt like she had beaten the cancer that had turned her world upside down.

"Everything was fine," she says. "I was doing great. No concerns whatsoever."

But as soon as she received the phone call asking her to return for a follow-up mammogram, the same swirl of feelings – fear, uncertainty, anger – came flooding back all over again.

"At that point, my heart sank," she says.

The emotional element – not the physical – was a larger challenge to overcome the first time around, she says, and the news that cancer had returned sent her reeling all over again.

“When you hear that diagnosis, it is shock and disbelief,” Zuege says, “because I looked at myself and I thought, wait a minute. I’m living a healthy lifestyle, I’m watching what I eat, I’m exercising, I’m doing everything right, and there’s no history in the family. It was kind of the almighty question of, why me?”

She came to the realization that there’s no answer. There are no guarantees in life. You can do everything possible to live a healthy lifestyle, but sometimes that’s not enough.

Though she was left powerless in that sense, Zuege did realize she had control of one element, and it would turn out to be the fiercest weapon in her battle to overcome cancer.



NAVIGATING THE FIGHT

“In both situations, I have come to accept the diagnosis, and once you accept the diagnosis you’re better equipped to face it head on,” Zuege notes. “I can’t change the diagnosis, but I can choose my attitude moving forward. I chose a fighting spirit and an attitude of *I did it once before and I can do it again.*”

It’s a mindset that did not go unnoticed by others.

“Every time I talk to Janice, whether on the phone, in person or via email, she is one of the most positive people I have ever met,” says Darci Grota, breast cancer nurse navigator at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Appleton.

Grota met Zuege shortly after her second diagnosis and followed her through treatment and beyond. Her role as a cancer nurse navigator includes equipping patients with information, joining them during surgery and medical oncology consultations, and maintaining regular contact through email.

“As navigators, we wear multiple hats,” Grota explains. “We wear the nursing hat when educating, we wear the supportive hat when talking to them during the times they may be a little bit scared or emotional, and we also cheerlead when they reach the hurdle of being done with surgery and chemotherapy.”

Nurse navigators act as the main point of contact. They serve as a guide, explain what to expect next and help inform patients on the variety of human resources available, ranging from a patient advocate or cosmetologist to a rehab or pastoral team.

“Our biggest role is being that go-to person,” adds Donna Rogers, cancer nurse navigator at Mercy Medical Center in Oshkosh. “Each cancer patient has their own journey. My job is to help guide them through it with the least amount of obstacles and barriers possible.”

Ten percent of all cancer is hereditary, explains Thea Johnson, genetic counselor at St. Elizabeth Hospital, meaning that there’s a genetic trait in the family that’s elevating the risk for certain types of cancer. Because of a number of factors, including an initial diagnosis at a young age and the second diagnosis, Johnson met with Zuege before

her surgery to talk about genetic testing and how it can be helpful in making informed decisions.

“I was involved pretty early on in her second diagnosis and then walked with her along the way when her genetic testing results came back,” she says. “The results help guide not only [the patient’s] immediate treatment needs, such as the surgery, but also the survivorship piece in terms of being very careful in screening more diligently than we would the average general population.”

Along the way, she became impressed by the way Zuege took part in her treatment process.

“She’s smart, educated and information-seeking,” Johnson adds. “Janice really took an active role in that she participated and really respected her team. She utilized us to the best of our abilities.”

The second time around, Zuege’s cancer treatment plan included a bilateral mastectomy, reconstructive surgery and chemotherapy.

A TIME TO HEAL

Now in remission again, Zuege and others note the period following cancer treatment creates an interesting dynamic that can be just as difficult – and often times even more so – than the treatment period itself.

“When patients go through treatment, it becomes a routine,” Rogers explains. “When that routine is over, there are fears and anxieties that go along with it. There’s relief because they’re done, but then many of them say, ‘I’ve been fighting this for so long, so now what?’”

In addition, cancer often times seeps into many other areas of life. Some survivors deal with the financial impact, bounce back from the side effects of chemotherapy, reel from any physical changes and adjust to being back at work. In some cases there’s a need to reevaluate the many relationships in their life as well.

Survivorship means different things to different people. Some say it begins with the cancer diagnosis. Others say it encompasses the period following treatment. What can’t be argued is the fact that the number of cancer survivors is substantial.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 14 million Americans with a previous cancer diagnosis are living in the United States. Improvements in early detection and treatment have helped ensure that people are living longer after diagnosis. Because of this, the transition from active treatment to post-treatment is critical. It’s a time to take charge of life in a way that promotes healing and long-term health, and Affinity offers a variety of options for support.

**“Take it a day at a time
and look forward to the
future... that sun gets
brighter and brighter as
you heal, as you recover,
as you get better.”**

— JANICE ZUEGE

P.E.A.C.E. (People Exercising After Cancer Enters) is an exercise program offered at Mercy Medical Center twice a week. Physical therapists help participants work on flexibility, strength, meditation, balance, endurance and relaxation training. The program is fully-funded by Mercy Health Foundation donors, making it free to all participants.

Integrative medicine is yet another option that can bring holistic



April Calvo



Darci Grota



Thea Johnson



Donna Rogers

healing approaches, such as adding acupuncture, massage, meditation and yoga into the mix.

Those looking for emotional and educational support can take part in “A Time to Heal,” a free, evidence-based rehabilitation program helping survivors and their caregivers regain physical, emotional and spiritual health after cancer treatment. The program is possible in part to a partnership between St. Elizabeth Hospital and St. Elizabeth Hospital Foundation, as well as HOPE Cancer Connection.

Over the course of 12 weeks, program participants have the opportunity to learn about a wide array of issues and share their own story. Each week includes an expert speaker in a given topic area that helps create a new normal through aspects ranging from diet and exercise to relaxation and journaling. Participants are encouraged to find tools that can be used in their years of survivorship that lay ahead.

April Pipping, nurse navigator for head, neck and lung cancer patients at St. Elizabeth Hospital, served as one of the main facilitators in addition to Grota, Johnson and several community members. As part of that involvement, she presented on the long-term side effects of radiation and chemotherapy early on in this fall’s “A Time to Heal” program.

It was clear to her during that initial presentation that some of the participants were comfortable sharing, while others were a bit more reluctant and reserved. But when she returned for week 10, the group dynamic had dramatically shifted.

“They were all engaging,” Pipping shares. “It was really neat to see the difference six weeks can make.”

Six months after the session ends, the group holds a reunion as a chance to reconnect with one another.

AFTER TREATMENT

Despite the many resources available, Zuege’s journey toward healing has been complicated.

She has had to shift from cancer patient to a support role for her husband, who has dealt with a rare form of skin cancer that was diagnosed

several years ago and since returned. In June, he underwent a lengthy surgery to remove the cancerous tumor and subsequently lost his right eye.

“I totally understand what my husband went through when I was going through cancer treatment, because now I am going through it as he struggles with cancer,” she says. “In some ways, even though going through cancer is very difficult for the patient, sometimes I think it is more difficult on the spouse.”

Zuege says the entire experience has resulted in an even stronger marriage and her current frame of mind remains optimistic, strong and thankful. But she has noticed a shift in perspective during her search for a sense of peace, comfort and healing.

“Life has taken on new meaning, and the meaning is one of deeper gratitude,” she says. “You take on a deeper appreciation for what you have rather than wishing for things that you don’t have.”

When asked how she’s managed to remain positive, Zuege points to a strong network of support: her husband, faith in God, employer and colleagues, friends and neighbors, and Affinity team members.

“The people you meet along the way, whether it’s the scheduler, the receptionist or the nurse that draws the blood – all of the Affinity employees I came into contact with – have been nothing but fabulous,” she says. “They’re kind, concerned and professional.”

Part of Zuege’s journey to healing seems to involve a desire to pay it forward and help others, Grota observes, which has revealed itself in a number of ways.

Recently, Zuege was nominated as someone who would be well-equipped to offer up valuable input as Affinity seeks feedback on progressing cancer services. She now sits on a patient advisory council, and she’s also become a self-described champion of mammogram screenings.

“As a result of my continuous preventive health recommendations, my cancers were caught at an early stage, and when they’re caught at an early stage they’re more treatable,” she says. “Prevention is the best intervention, so I feel that it is extremely important for women to get the annual screening mammograms.”

At other times, this desire to help others reveals itself in her willingness to share her story or a few words of wisdom with those who are enduring similar health challenges.

“Take it a day at a time and look forward to the future,” Zuege says. “At the time you go through a dark period in your life you start seeing the sun shine again, and that sun gets brighter and brighter as you heal, as you recover, as you get better. For me, I can’t dwell on the fact that I’ve had cancer twice. I just move forward.” @

Strands of Courage

Only nine days passed before Nancy Wilms’ hair started to fall out in her hands.

“Nobody knew I had cancer until I lost my hair,” she says.

“I felt like I had lost control of my condition because it was suddenly so public.”

Diagnosed in May 2014, Wilms will tell you that cancer doesn’t care if you’re ready to cope or not. She knows this because she only had one chemotherapy treatment and had to confront the destruction of the disease in the form of hair loss almost immediately.

Some chemotherapy drugs used to kill cancer cells can cause damage to hair follicles, which makes hair fall out.

“I had come to terms with the diagnosis and

was ready to fight, but I wasn’t prepared to deal with what I would lose in the process,” she says, reaching up to graze her new pixie style.

Donna Rogers, cancer nurse navigator at Mercy Medical Center, and a friend of Wilms accompanied her to the wig room at the hospital. They discovered it was not a pleasing or positive environment. Wigs, scarves and hats were stored untidily in plastic bags. Privacy was limited and there was only a small mirror.

In October 2014, Wilms completed treatment at Michael D. Wachtel Cancer Center within Mercy, but the emotional experience with hair loss has stuck with her.

Having been a volunteer at Mercy for five years, she now uses some of that time to transform the wig room into a welcoming



refuge and support Mercy Health Foundation’s fundraising efforts to make it possible.

“Coming into this room should be as good as walking into your own salon,” Wilms says. “I want to help someone else going through it.”

To learn how you can help, visit www.mmcgift.org.