

Recounting a Battle Against Cancer

Los Alamos Monitor, 18th October 2011

~by Elizabeth Turner

Special to the Monitor

Looking down at her cup of Good Earth tea, she explains that her father had been buried just six months before she was diagnosed with breast cancer. But looking at the sun illuminating her face- that healthy glow of satisfaction and stability- no one would ever know that she had once been nearly too weak to even get out of bed. It was only by choosing to accept her unfortunate circumstances that Peggy Reneau has made it back to the bright side of life.



It was in the spring of 2006 when Peggy first detected a BB-sized lump in her breast. Though aware of a family history tainted by various cancers, she was taken off guard at the possibility that she could be its next victim. After all, she had been going through regular mammogram check-ups and had worked to make sure that her health was in tune. How, then, had she suddenly woken up face to face with a monster? Her father may have reassured the statistic that less than one percent of males are diagnosed with breast cancer, but she had worked to prevent a similar fate from affecting her future. That's why, when her worst fear was confirmed, she found that no amount of preparation could have braced her for the toll cancer was to take on her body, mind, and spirit.

Before Peggy had the chance to think about what the first step would be, today had already become tomorrow. She was immediately scheduled for a lumpectomy and sentinel node biopsy by a reputable Albuquerque breast surgeon as soon as the word *cancer* lingered in the air. Two excised axillary lymph nodes, which are located under the arms, were then cut in half and inspected for malignancy. To Peggy's tremendous relief, both turned out to be benign. Radiation treatments now seemed to be the only treatment necessary and life could soon return to normal once again. However, only about a week later, further pathology lab tests proved otherwise; one of the two halves

was malignant after all. This meant she would have to undergo chemotherapy as well—the exact news she had crossed her fingers to avoid. What’s more, the contaminated cells could easily spread to cause further damage to the rest of her body, for it had already progressed to stage IIA. Peggy Reneau had a challenging road ahead of her.

The anxiety of not only being diagnosed, but also having to live with cancer was no light matter. Before the lengthy months of chemotherapy were to begin, a port was implanted to provide a way for the drugs to be injected into her body. Just after the third chemo treatment, Peggy shudders as she recalls, her hands and feet had already blistered over and peeled, a side effect for some. Food could barely be stomached and she became weak and thin. In fact, just as quickly as she experienced losing her own hair, she had to drop many of her hobbies, too. No more walks or hikes or even regular hours of work. The potency of the drugs was just too overwhelming to handle. “You have a set number of treatments and just keep counting down,” she also adds, for otherwise there seemed no other way to get through the endless agony. And while the number did in fact shrink from sixteen chemo treatments to zero by December 1, 2006, she still had a ways to go. Over the course of about two months, she also endured thirty-three radiation treatments. Yet, even after continuous doctor trips and sometimes discouraging news, there remained her steadfast goal to survive. Taking one day at a time, she embodied the hope to make it through the tedious months of treatment.

“What flavor of cardboard would you like this evening?” her husband, Steve, would ask, laughs Peggy. She explains that even the smell of food could send her over the edge with nausea because of the treatment’s harsh side effects. However, bland food didn’t seem to deter her from thinking positively. Steve was her rock, and the help received from friends bringing food and driving her to doctor appointments and treatments made her rethink all that she took for granted.

She understood how violating cancer could be, but she also realized that being stripped down to who you truly are builds incredible character. She describes it as a shove to self-discovery, in which she has learned what makes her tick in the great scheme of life. The little things no longer matter so much and the world can wait while she stops to smell the roses. Looking back, she says her journey has been one of both challenges and rewards. The extent to which cancer can ruin a person obviously never quite caught up with her because perseverance only made her run faster.

Peggy admits that it hasn’t always been easy to stay on “the positive side of the fence” during her experience with breast cancer. Rebuilding both health and stamina after having been broken down is no easy task, a process that still continues though she reached her “5-year-out” milestone this spring. However, each time she sits out in the sun, such as now, she realizes that the white clouds are whiter and the green grass greener than before. “Cancer was just that big lesson to learn,” she concludes, beaming with love and respect for life. And as I look across the table at her cup of tea, which is

now almost gone, I am inspired that Peggy's battle with breast cancer has caused her to see the glass as being half full instead of half empty.