Ghadeer Kunna

49

Stage 3 breast cancer survivor

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[Intro]

Policy and strategy advisor Ghadeer Kunna says that she had no reason to suspect that she was at risk of developing breast cancer. There was no family history of the disease, and contemporary thinking in the late 1990s was that only women in the forties were at risk. Despite an active lifestyle, healthy diet and having never touched a cigarette or alcohol, she developed a very aggressive form of breast cancer that grew at an alarming rate. It was detected in 2012 and treated in 2013, and she has been cancer free for the past five years.

[The Story]

My ordeal started at the age of 29. It seemed crazy at the time. I was living in California, near Berkeley, and I was into organic foods before anyone was talking about it. I was also very slim and very active.

There was no family history of breast cancer, so there was no reason to suspect anything. At the time, in the late 1990s, people didn’t talk about breast cancer as much and it seemed that it was the kind of thing that was very rare and really only happened to other people. Certainly not to someone who went to the Farmer’s Market, worked out five times a week and didn’t smoke or drink – and certainly not at 29.

I remember the moment I felt the lump. I had been out for my morning run and noticed something wrong in the shower. There was a bump that hadn’t been there the night before, and I just knew something was wrong. Time just stood still. I don’t really know how to explain those few moments that passed by.

My GP at the time was a good friend, and I knew he was going camping that weekend. I never called him on his mobile before, so when I did, he knew something was wrong He picked up the call on the second ring and said, “What’s up?”

I tried to play things down, and told him I wanted to make an appointment for when he was back because I’d found a lump. I heard the screech of metal, and he said, “I’ll see you in the clinic in two hours.”

Using manual checkup, he discovered multiple lumps in both breasts. We did an immediate mammogram, ultrasound and biopsy. The lumps turned out to be benign, but I still felt something wasn’t quite right – so we settled on a plan that I would go in for an ultrasound every four months, and a mammogram and ultrasound (because my breasts were dense) every year. And I kept doing that until 2006 when I came to the UAE through to 2010 when things started to change out of the blue. The doctor told me that there had been a mutation in the cells, and that they weren’t sure why.

I had those removed, but these mutations kept on happening and by mid-June 2012 took a turn for the worse as I kept having non-stop bleeding which we initially thought was a heavy period. Once the mutations started, we added an annual MRI to keep closer watch. Doctors weren’t sure what was going on. However, in the first week of January 2013 the MRI made things much clearer. I was told I had a very aggressive form of breast cancer which had already spread to my right lymph node, and that my chemotherapy would have to start immediately.

To be told you have breast cancer is a shock. The last thing you really want to hear is that it’s an aggressive type. If that’s the icing on the cake, you can keep it.

My doctor took me through my diagnosis page by page. I was a pre-med student before I switched to Business, so my doctor knew that I understood a lot of medical lingo. She gave me the report – all four pages of it – and as she read it, I followed along. I didn’t recognize one word. Everything seemed jumbled. I didn’t even recognize the alphabet – it just looked like Chinese to me. We went over it again, and everything came into focus.

Chemo started that day, and I made a deal with my doctor that she wouldn’t tell me how many sessions were planned. I knew I had to fight, and it didn’t matter how many times I had to go in for this treatment. I told them I didn’t want to know until it was the one before the last. Meantime, I had to fight and survive each day.

The type of chemotherapy I had was very painful. It saved my life and I am grateful for it, but it is one of the most painful things I have ever endured. You can’t move. You’re burning as you sit there. It feels like lava as it courses through your body – and all you can do is sit there and fight through it.

I had time on the way home to think about how I was going to get through this. I decided the ball was in my court and I wasn’t going to let cancer beat me. There were things I couldn’t change – but there were things I could control, and one of them was my hair. I wasn’t going to just wait and let it fall; I went ahead and shaved it.

The three days that follow chemo are the worst. I was just too weak to handle things, and sometimes wouldn’t be in a position to go to work on Sunday or Monday. I would pass out in the office – but I had to push through.

I opted for a double mastectomy in September as the left breast was already showing the same signs of what was happening to the right breast. I had responded to the chemotherapy well, and the operation was a success.

One of the unexpected things about chemo is losing your sense of taste and smell – and I lost it for nine months. I used to psyche myself up to eat even though I couldn’t smell or taste it properly. I used to remind myself how food used to taste, and I used to just make myself eat the portions required because my body needed it.

The first thing I remember smelling was water. Did you know that water has the sweetest smell? I poured a glass of water and brought it to my mouth and just sniffed, because I smelled sweetness. I couldn’t believe it. It was just amazing.

I think many women resist being tested, not through fear of diagnosis, but through fear of consequences of the disease. We don’t talk about this as much as we should; how many partnerships break up because of this, how many husbands cheat because they can’t handle the changes their wives have gone through. Across all cultures, all countries. And this is one of the reasons some don’t want to come forward and talk about being survivors; there’s a stigma attached. They’re scared that another partner won’t chose them or that they will be singled out in the society.

If you look at the statistics, a lot of people relapse because of psychological reasons. This is one disease that needs you to fight all the time, positively. It’s a tough thing to beat, and we need to help people fit back into life easily without that feeling of rejection at any level be it professional, personal or by family and friends. Not everyone is strong.

When women see others go through all that drama, what message are we sending to people to go and get tested? They’re not seeing women welcomed back easily.

I’ve been in remission now for five years and I feel blessed to have lived through cancer. It has made me focus on the important things in life, on helping others. There were things that, at 43, I thought were really important that became nothing. It has made me truly understand the beauty of life in a very simplistic way. Beauty of life for me is no longer attached to big things. And most of all, it made me realize, that inner strength, is truly the best source of confidence and power.