Randa Mushtaha

46

Stage 1 breast cancer survivor

Content director, almentor.net

Jordan

[Intro]

Journalist, mentor and mother of three Randa Mushtaha says her ordeal with cancer has made her a far stronger person. After her initial diagnosis, she approached the disease with a pragmatism that she had never experienced before, tackling each challenge as an opportunity to learn. This acceptance saw her through her surgery and chemotherapy, rekindling a passion for writing and fashion that now fills her spare time. She says facing and beating cancer convinced her that she could overcome any other challenge in her life, and that while the disease changes you, it also teaches you many valuable life lessons.

[The Story]

I was 40 years old, had my first symptoms and was requested to do a mammogram which showed I had a lump, however the doctors confirmed it was nothing. This is when my journey started with cancer.

Two years later in April 2014 I saw a clear lump sticking out of my breast that I hadn’t seen before and it seemed to appear overnight. I went to my gynecologist the next day and he sent me for a mammogram and an ultrasound. The radiologist confirmed that it didn’t look good, but my doctor didn’t agree, so he performed a needle aspiration and called me three days later to tell me that it is not cancer. Little did he know that he applied it on the wrong area.

I really wanted to believe I was ok, that the doctor is right, tried to brush off the idea. Five months later and I still could feel the lump growing, went back to my doctor for another biopsy, and this time my doubts were confirmed.

Hearing that I had cancer for the first time, was a relief. Yes, I don’t have to doubt anymore and I don’t have to overthink. But that was only for a minute. Then suddenly, I was able to see it hitting me like a storm of uncertainty. What’s next? What about my kids? What about my family? What is going to happen? Questions stormed in and fear and anxiety enveloped me. It was the moment I wasn’t in control anymore. My life changed, I changed. My doctor started listing down procedures I have to undertake, but I was disconnected, not present anymore.

As crazy as this whole thing was, I went into “go” mode and I wanted it out of me in the quickest, most effective way possible. So two days later, I was on a plane to England with my lovely sister. Then my brother followed and mum and then few friends. I was feeling the love and support from everyone around, accompanied by the guilt of upsetting the people I care most about.

I met my surgeon and a week after my diagnosis, I went in for my mastectomy. It is a very weird feeling to leave this world and come back missing an important part of your body, of yourself. How will I feel in this forever-changed body? Will I be less stressed with a lower chance of future breast cancer? Am I being selfish that my appearance matters to me? It was hard for me to accept to lose a part that to me was partially identifying my femininity, spiritually and physically. I think we sort of like to believe that plastic surgeries will make everything better. It did help, but not as much as people think. I lost connection to my body.

Recovery took 10 years, actually 10 days but it felt like 10 years! The only way I was able to pass through them is by spending time with my kids and family. A walk around the hospital, or a cup of coffee with mum with my drains covered under a big shawl. It is weird having something that is totally consuming and affecting your life in terms of pain and mental health, but when people look at you, they can’t see it.

Next, came in chemo! It started with a pre-chemo session where I spent an hour with the nurse who explained all about the chemotherapy, and the side effects of the huge doses of medications I will be getting. It was a long session. She talked about hair loss, nausea, body weakness, and much more; but the question that hit me the most was when she asked me if I had kids! I said “yes, three of them.” She then asked “are you planning on having more kids?” and I said “yes, I would love to.” “Hard luck dear, I’m afraid you can’t,” she said. “The medication will put you into early menopause!”

When I arrived for my first chemo session. I was not very scared since I knew all about the side effects and consequences. The fact that I had been around people with cancer, and saw how they lost their hair, their energy, their features and their lives even, made me very conscious of what is coming ahead.

My mum, my sister (who arrived from Dubai that day) and my friend who came from Windsor, were all there, with their eyes wide open; hiding their worries and being humorous trying like me to protect one another from our own emotions.

I watched the nurse walk towards me carrying the first bag of medicine. There were many of them. She injected the needle in the vein and I waited for something to happen. I was waiting for the pain, for the nausea, for the tiredness… waiting for something – but it didn’t happen. I then changed my mind!! Yes! I just thought that I have a strong body that tolerates all types of pain. After many operations and surgeries that I had, I used to leave the hospital in less than 48 hours and sometimes 24 hours.

I was telling my mum: “this is better than I thought!” but that didn’t last long. All of a sudden it hit me, I don’t know what happened, I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t see anyone. I had plans for the night, but the doctor decided I had to stay in the hospital overnight.

I only got my energy back a week after and the first thing I did was visit the hairdresser to get my hair cut, a very short cut before it starts falling, but he refused. I had long hair and he wouldn’t cut it. He was Italian and he refused to believe I was going to lose it, and he didn’t want to be the one to cut it.

Every day I would wake up and wait for my hair to fall. I bought a wig, and nice turbans, I was looking forward to my new style. Then, a couple of days before the second session of chemo, before going to bed, I felt strong pain in my scalp. It felt so weird until I saw my hair fall off. The next morning, my beautiful sister in law, came over put me in her car and took me to her beauty salon to cut my hair really short. I kept seeing my hair fall so I decided to shave my head and save myself the pain of watching that.

I used to stay home for ten days after my chemo, and then have a week long party before the next session – and go everywhere I can go and do everything I can do to build up my spirit for the next session and the ten days after it. Chemo did exhaust me, but it couldn’t touch the spark within. That helped to carry me through to the finish line.

Cancer patients often hear the words: "You're so brave! I could never go through that." As if we have a choice or are selected based on our bravery. Cancer in general - used to scare me – but it isn’t scary at all. I had cancer, and slowly, with treatment, it cleared my body. I wasn’t fighting anything, I didn’t want to fight anything because there was nothing in my control.

My experience with cancer really changed my life. I don’t have an explanation for this, but sometimes I miss my days of going through that journey. I’m sure I don’t miss the pain, the water retention is gone and I’ve grown back my hair – but I miss something. I seriously can’t put my finger on what that is. It could be the positive support I used to get from people around me. It could be the lessons I learnt, the strength I got. Or maybe the feeling of strength I had in me and pride to power through, I realised that I am a lot stronger than I'd given myself credit. In truth, we often rise up and surface with hidden strength during times when we have no choice but to plow through. We put one foot in front of the other because moving forward is the only thing we know how to do. That's when I discovered I can handle the unimaginable after all. I have to say that I got a lot of strength from my parents and family, my husband, my quiet son and my beautiful daughters. It brought us all closer together.

Every cloud has a silver lining, and cancer though it might have robbed me of certain things like my health, it was powerless to take away the things in my life that mattered the most. My family, my strength, my wild spirit and my motivation. It planted deeper roots for them instead.

If I can face cancer, I know that I can face any hurdles I may have with my work, my career, my passion. I’ve beaten cancer, I can overcome anything. I don’t know where this came from; I was never like this, but it just ignited something in me. I’m passionate about a lot of things but I never had the guts to develop my capabilities or skills before because something would get in the way. Now, I feel nothing can stand in my way.

If I want to pass an advice to any person who is reading this now, I would tell you to simply listen to your body. There is no special age for cancer and the sooner you are screened the better. In the Middle East, we’re definitely scared of cancer a.k.a “The disease that must not be named”. It makes me happy to see more campaigns happening around it to increase awareness to this disease and the benefits of early detection. Don’t be afraid of cancer, yes there is something you lose in your journey but also a lot that you gain. It is not a one-way street.