

About Sara's journey:

I remember a conversation I had in December about how truly HAPPY I was and how life was so WONDERFUL. Claire was about to turn one. Married life was great. I felt like I was in a really good place and time in my life.

Then it was New Years and I came down with the flu. I remember lying in bed, trying to nap and breastfeed Claire and I felt something. My milk supply was very low because I was severely dehydrated. (This turned out to be a blessing in disguise because that's the only way I would've ever found the lump.) Initially, I thought, "plugged milk duct?" and tried to massage it out. I told my husband and he got nervous. I called my mom and she told me to make an appt. I told my sister and she tried to reassure me that it might be a cyst. So I had a mammogram and a biopsy.

But on Friday, January 10, 2003, at age 30, I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

The doctor called with the "news" mid-afternoon. He said I had a invasive ductal carcinoma. Luckily, a friend was visiting, but I remember calling my husband and forcing myself to cry to him because I didn't know how to react. He rushed home. I was overwhelmed by the medical terminology. And didn't know where to begin. I just felt numb.

I tried to figure out where it came from, what I did, how it happened because I was only 30 and doing everything "right" – was very healthy, breastfeeding, exercising. It didn't make sense.

So on this cold January day, a new chapter of life began..... one that I was so scared to face.

That evening I breastfed my daughter for one last time. I cried as I told her that everything was going to be okay. Claire did okay with weaning, but this loss was one of the hardest things for me to accept. I didn't want this choice to be stolen from me.

The next few weeks was filled with heavy interviewing of surgeons and oncologists, getting examined and questioning processes and treatments. Getting pregnant again (and possibly breastfeeding) was on the forefront of my mind, and I continuously asked about possibilities. Oncologists didn't want to talk about pregnancy, when my survival was an immediate concern. They didn't "get it", didn't get me -- maybe because I was younger than most breast cancer patients and had other concerns. And then I was hit hard with reality when one oncologist told me flat out that "I might not survive". No until after my surgery would I know the diagnosis. I needed to know ALL of the scenerios. But I wasn't ready to accept death as an option... I needed to find an oncologist who could talk to me with compassion, hope and honesty, and would listen to my concerns as a young woman. I found it at the U of M.

I elected a lumpectomy which was scheduled two days after my daughter's first birthday. Nervousness filled my entire body and I cried as they sudated me and wheeled me into surgery. David wouldn't let go of Claire the entire time.... he was terrified. My parents and in-laws were there. Surgery was longer than expected because my sentinel node biopsy was positive in the first node, so they had to remove all the other nodes. My final diagnosis was Stage 2, grade 3, 1.5 cm long with clear margins. I was ER-positive and Her2 neu negative. One node involved, 4 mm.

I woke up and David was there smiling, holding my hand.

Thankfully, I did not know how awful I would feel after the surgery. I woke up with compression garments on my legs, hooked up to circulators. I was so groggy and remember hardly being able to walk to the bathroom. I hurt and was on A LOT of medication. I had a lymph drainage tube coming out of my chest wall under my arm --YUK, this was pleasant!

I reminisced that "almost one year ago to the day, I was in the hospital celebrating the new life of our beautiful daughter and life was so good..." Now look at why I'm here!

Chemo started soon after I recovered from surgery. I chose the regiment: CEF (cytoxan, Epirubicin, 5Floricil, Adriamycin) which was 6 cycles of two consecutive Fridays in the chemo lab for 2-3 hours, and oral cytoxin daily for two straight weeks, then off for 2 weeks. I had a port put in to save my veins, and frequently had Nulasta (sp?) shots to boost my blood counts.

My body did not like chemo AT ALL. I was nauseated the entire 2 weeks time that chemo was administered. Sofran didn't work. I couldn't eat. I lost about 20 pounds. Got mouth sores, was severely constipated. It wasn't pleasant. I tried to remain positive and "strong" and I almost convinced myself. Although during my entire treatment, I was blessed with parents (living 2 hours away) and in-laws who were amazing. They switched off 5 days a week to be with me, brought me to therapy when David couldn't, watched our baby, cooked and cleaned so I could take care of myself, rest and gain strength. And so many generous family members, friends and other people, some of whom we didn't know, helped and brought meals over to our home. I don't know what I would've done without everyone.

Losing my hair seemed to be a little bigger deal than I thought it would. The chemo worked just like clockwork. I remember the week I lost my hair, being nervous to tug at my hair in the shower. It was surreal being able to pull it out. It was coming out in clumps so I went to Wigs Without Worry, a downtown Mpls salon. A WONDERFUL PLACE! He let my sister shave my head and fit my beautiful wig. I tried to be upbeat and silly, but inside I was very sad and self-conscious. I rarely wore my wig. And it took me a while to show people my bald head. Eventually I did. It was still monumental to me, even after 6 months, the day I removed my scarf in front of my peers .. and my hair was starting to come back.

Chemo lasted thru the end of July and radiation started in August. Radiation was no sweat! I had about 42 treatments – every morning at 7am. I was the first one to get "zapped" and home before my husband had to go to work. The chemo was leaving my system so life was much better. I didn't realize how low things were until they started getting better. Tamoxifen started shortly after, in October, and I am just finishing my third year (out of a suggested five).

Through this entire experience, the medical and support staff were so awesome, that I was sad to not see them regularly after my treatments had ceased. They made all the difference to me.

I don't think I really processed what had happened until my treatments were over and I had quiet time. I wasn't receiving the constant support from doctors or family and that was really hard. I suffered from depression -- became very angry, then very sad for about three or four months. I figured I was mourning the loss of my "previous life", and finally accepted that I will die some day. I just wanted life to be back to normal, like all of my friends' lives were. I sought help through a counselor and support groups, whom helped me grow spiritually, emotionally and mentally. I practiced meditation, journaling, and reorganized my life so I could paint more. This became a HUGE healing outlet for me.

I even entered a contest through Amoena, and my art became a pin that was distributed nationally. That was very fun and exciting. It was printed with my poem that reads:

I DREAM. I HOPE. I EMBRACE. I AM ALIVE.

I celebrate for every day
and every night.

I embrace love and life,
the good and the bad.

I live with hope.

I will never stop dreaming.

I am happy to be alive!

I also attended breast cancer conferences and participated in their art shows. Those were empowering. I felt energized with being a racer in the Race for the Cure, and wearing my pink hat, gaining another ribbon for survival each year. Now, I want to help women, especially young women, make them aware. I am a survivor, and don't mind if the world knows it.

NOW...After 3 and a half years, I still have the strong desire to have another baby... probably daily. It is very hard when many of my friend's lives continue to grow (like I wish mine could so easily too). But medical professionals don't know if there are risks involved with pregnancy after breast cancer, especially my being ER-positive status. There is really no research to support or hinder. There is a chance, but there may also be a risk. So we are looking at other options.

Looking back, I think what still saddens me most is that I missed Claire's second year of life. I couldn't be a mom or a wife that year, and I will never get that time back. I certainly wish I didn't have the cancer, but I would never change the insight I gained from it:

That I am very blessed. That life changes when I least expect, and I can't stop change, just learn to accept it. That my husband has more strength than I ever knew. That my daughter is the best gift life could've given me. That family's love is unconditional. That little acts of kindness really do mean something. That people are amazing and will help even if they don't know me. That sharing a little hope goes a long way. That I need to appreciate more and trivialize less. That my strength comes from a positive attitude, but also in honoring ALL of my feelings, especially sadness and anger. That life will end some day, so I don't want to take my family and life for granted. That I still have dreams, and even though my vision has been altered, they are still real. That I was kept on this earth to make a difference...and I'm still trying to figure out what that is.

So my "revised" journey continues...