

Who really thinks a 30 year old could have Colon Cancer?

This year in June, I will celebrate being a Colon Cancer survivor for 5 years. This is A milestone many thought I would never achieve.

By the time they had found my baseball sized tumor in 2006 at 30 years old, it had wrapped itself around the head of my pancreas and mesenteric vein. About 10 months before my cancer was found, my marriage of 9 years ended. I had finally earned my Bachelors Degree in May of 2005 for Theatre Production for Costume Design from Northeastern in Boston. I had graduated with Honors and had spent my last semester in Florence, Italy at SACI. **One thing I can say is... there are no regrets in my life.** If I could dream it, I did it or if I didn't reach the exact goal, something just as great happened. Traveling to Europe was a big life goal of mine, and I was blessed to spend a whole semester abroad.

After my divorce, I moved to California to try and start over. As much as I LOVE New England (especially Boston) I really think I was trying to get as far away as possible to start a new life. However, I never really had the feeling of a fresh start on the West coast. Something else seemed to be lingering, but was intangible at the moment. I kept strongly feeling like I needed to come home to Indiana to be with my family. The last time I had felt that way, I came home and not two weeks later my mother broke her back. Thankfully I was home to take care of her. I applied to NYU but did not get in. While in California, to build up my portfolio, I worked on three Independent films. But I began running out of money, missing my family, and ended up taking a job at Borders just to pay rent and eat! **Little did I know, my life was about to change forever.**

My symptoms started in mid-April 2006. I went to the movies and had a hotdog. That night I felt like someone was pumping my stomach full of air and compacting it at the same time with no gas coming out. I also had severe back pain (**Clue #1 abdominal pain**). There is your normal bloating and gas which goes along with "Oh, why did I eat that stuff"... but this was different. I started to feel faint at work and my typical high energy was going down (**Clue #2 fatigue**). I didn't feel like walking along the beach anymore and stayed in bed more often. My stools were looking different... It took 2 ½ attacks like the movie hotdog for me to think... *"Ok, This is too weird, I need to get checked out"*. (**Clue #3 Change in bowel habits & Clue #4 Blood in Stool**). At that point, I had cut out all fats in my diet, which made me have the attacks. I was losing weight (**Clue #5 rapid weight loss**). I kept getting the distinct feeling that this was a wake up call. I went to a doctor in California, but it was taking too long to get through the medical system out there. The doctor seemed to think it was just gall bladder issues and did not take me very seriously. But really... who thinks a 30 year old could have Colon Cancer? **I know if I had Googled my symptoms, it would never have occurred to me that I may have Colon Cancer.** Only old, fat, white men get that disease, right?

I sadly gave my notice at Borders and moved back home to Indiana. Something told me I'd need some kind of surgery and knew I needed to go

home. I made an appointment to see my childhood family doctor. They could see a mass after a scan... You know it's not a good sign when you get asked to come back into the office to talk to the doctor. My first thought when I was diagnosed was *"Ok, what step do we take next?"* **I remember naively asking "so when will I get back to normal?" I've got plans and goals and Europe to go back to someday!** I really did not feel as bad as I should have been, considering the size of the mass. In a way, I'm glad they didn't find it in California, because I wouldn't have had my family with me.

I got my initiation into the "Colon Cleanse Club" and had my colonoscopy and biopsy. My first surgery was in June 2006 to get the start of the tumor out of my colon. They biopsied 13 lymph nodes and luckily none were cancerous! I've now had two doctors tell me that I have the type of Colon Cancer that seems to like the same area. Most cancers spread throughout the blood stream and take over your body. My problem was that the rest of the tumor was wrapped around the head of my pancreas and a major vein. The pancreas is one of the deadliest areas to get infiltrated with cancer. After 12 cycles of Chemo, the tumor shrank to an operable size. My second surgery was March 2, 2007 and was a success with the dead tumor being peeled off my pancreas!

In March 2009, just as I was applying to graduate school for Costume Design, a routine scan revealed my cancer was back in my pancreas in between two major veins. I had another successful surgery after chemo/radiation. I was happily accepted into Graduate school at Carnegie Mellon University for my Master's Degree. They were even going to hold my place if I was not able to attend in 2009. I did attend in 2009 and while at school, I was still experiencing diarrhea after my surgery. I knew my body well enough to know that something just wasn't right. **Another routine scan in June 2010 revealed a small mass in my small bowel. Surgery was scheduled for September 9, 2010 after 4 rounds of chemo.**

By far, my surgery in September 2010 was the hardest thing I've ever been through and the hardest recovery. I thought it was going to be just like every other surgery. I would go under and be out of the hospital in just a couple of weeks. Little did I know that I was experiencing intestinal failure as the new tumor was wrapped around the vein that supplies blood to the intestines. I was kept under for 6 days, went through 3 surgeries and was in the hospital a month. When I woke up, I found out my entire small bowel had to be removed. They did their best to save it, but were not able to. It was hard to understand while on a lot of pain medication what the doctor was telling me... He pointed to an IV bag (TPN) and said *"This is your food now."* Inside my head, I was thinking *"What do you mean? When do I get to eat?"* I experienced depression and a mourning of the loss of my small bowel. I cannot really eat foods because they will pass right through me. Any food or drinks can possibly cause more harm than good, they cause diarrhea and can make me become dehydrated. I have to completely rely on my physician and Nutrition Company to supply the nutrients I need to survive each day. For a control freak, this is very challenging!

I am now in the waiting period to stay cancer free for 2 ½ - 5 years. I will then get on the waiting list for a small bowel transplant. It is one of the most challenging transplants due to infection rates and risk of rejection. For the rest of my life, I would be on anti-rejection drugs.

While learning how to live life dependant on IV nutrition, I went from not wanting to live at all this way... to figuring out how to live with it and do the things I want to accomplish in my life. God makes all things possible. If you have the will He will find the way. **My life has been more than enough proof of the miracles all around us. Never give up! Even when everything seems impossible.**

Paula