

Two Friends' Journey

“Why don't you sit down?”

The doctor greeted me and I obliged.

I'm very concerned with your MRI.”

A sudden sweat came over me.

He went on. “You have a large mass on your shoulder.”

What? Could this be cancer? This must be some mistake.

He went on to say that he wanted me to be seen by an orthopedic oncologist.

Oh my God, even he is thinking it might be cancer.

The doctor handed me the phone number of the oncologist, and my body began to tremble, as I feared embarking on the most difficult journey I had ever faced.

I quickly composed myself, put the MRI film under my arm, and headed out the door. Scrambling through my purse, I grabbed my cell phone and dialed my husband's number. I don't think Kevin even knew where I was. Busy getting the kids off to school, I didn't remind him that I was going to the doctor's office today for my results. Between tears and a poor cell phone connection, I managed to tell him the news, and then the call was lost. Hurrying to my car, I called my parents, who live about an hour away. They answered the phone at the same time. I barely managed to tell them the reason for my call when they announced, “We're on our way.”

I dialed again.

“Jean, it's me. I just got my MRI results and there's a mass on my shoulder. Can I come over to talk to Mike?” Jean and Mike are my good friends and Mike is an oncologist at Mass General in Boston, the same hospital where my doctor practices. Arriving just a few minutes later, Mike greeted me at the door, wrapping his arms around me in a warm embrace. Taking the film, he headed to his office and closed the door. I went down the hall to see Jean, resting in bed. She has just completed her last round of chemo for breast cancer. We looked at one another and began to cry. Was this really happening? Jean had cancer. Could I have it too?

A few minutes later Mike came and sat with us. In his calm and comforting bedside manner, one I would come to know well, he explained the tumor. He said it was around my shoulder blade and that it definitely looked like cancer. I leaned over, putting my hands over my face, and cried harder than ever before. Jean held me tight. We might actually be doing this cancer thing together. This wasn't exactly something I wanted to experience with a friend, but I sure didn't want to go through it alone.

Two days later, I whisked my three daughters off to school and headed back to the hospital, with my mom and husband by my side, for more scans and a bone needle biopsy of the tumor. After the biopsy, Mike came by and asked if I'd like the results. I hesitated, but knew I wanted them.

“It's cancer, Pam.”

I was diagnosed with Stage III, synovial cell sarcoma. There was no time to waste. My doctors explained that I'd be hospitalized several days at a time for the chemotherapy infusions, with radiation and major surgery added to the mix. With doctor appointments filling up my already busy calendar, I had to quickly get things organized for the unplanned leave of absence I would require over the next several months.

So began my introduction to the angels in my life.

My mom moved in and stayed with us to cover the home front. Jean was feeling better and asked if she could set up a meal chain of friends, just as had been done for her. Friends and family started dropping off dinner for us almost every night and carting our daughters, ages four, ten, and twelve, to

their after school activities. My mother-in-law lived close by and was helping out in every way possible. We felt incredibly blessed to have this circle of support around us.

Arriving at the hospital a few days later for my first round of chemo, I was taken to the room where I would be residing for the next few days. My roommate had her PJs on. Did I have to wear mine? Maybe I could hang out in my clothes for a while.

I was trapped in a room with a view of the Boston skyline and people biking along the Charles River.

I introduce myself to my roommate, Bee, and coincidentally, she was in for a rare shoulder tumor too.

The nurse brought in a scale to get my weight. The chemotherapy “cocktail” has to be measured according to body weight. Okay, maybe I should take my clothes off after all.

A week later, the nausea was gone, radiation was going fine, and my strength had nearly returned. It was great to be home with my family. Chemo was rough and I couldn’t help but keep thinking that I would have to go back for more.

I decided to just focus on getting through. It wasn’t exactly a walk in the park, but it was a whole lot easier with friends and family jumping in to take care of the day-to-day tasks at home.

Looking back now, I remember the journey well. Whether it was meals, rides to soccer practice and Girl Scouts, or helping with laundry, friends and family were consistently there.

Jean and I both felt incredibly blessed to have support from family and shared friends during our travels through cancer. Coming together around the dinner table for a warm meal was about the only sense of “normalcy” we could maintain with our families during such a vulnerable time. Our friends were like angels fluttering in with a tasty meal to nourish us. No fanfare, just a kind gesture to warm our hearts and help us through another day. It was quite moving and beyond words. I couldn’t thank them enough for reaching out to us that way.

A few months after treatments and with surgeries behind us, Jean and I decided to ask our chain of friends if they’d like to keep the network going in town. The response was unanimous. Thirty-five eager volunteers formed the “Wayland Angels” and set off to help others facing crisis. Within months, families in need were receiving meals, rides, and more. As word of this concept spread, Angel volunteer networks started forming in other communities to provide the same kinds of services.

Six years later, Wayland Angels has several hundred volunteers and has delivered thousands of meals and countless rides for neighbors in need in our community. The Angel volunteer networks are creating limitless opportunity for community outreach, inspiring individuals to establish these partnerships and bring back old-fashioned values of helping neighbors in need.

In today’s busy world, small acts of kindness can not only make a significant impact in one person’s life, but collectively, these acts can change the entire fabric of a community, reminding us to think of others first, lend a hand to someone in need, and take care of one another.

Facing cancer firsthand, as a family member, or as a friend, is hard. Cancer touches everyone involved. Knowing friends and neighbors are there to help you in your time of need means so much. And, it’s even better knowing that someday you can pay that forward.

~Pam Washek

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