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## Breast Cancer Awareness Month: A survivor's story

October 18, 2012 - Front Section

August 3rd, 2011: My surgeon, Dr. Fanis Nakalis from the Faulkner Hospital in Boston, has squeezed me in at 8 a.m. Friday morning. The moment I saw her, my eyes widened with such hope! She was one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, tall, with long wavy brown hair and a real smile! She spoke with a beautiful accent which I could not detect. I later found out she was Russian. I loved listening to her talk. She was so sweet, and funny too. We shared a lot of laughs together. I left there with such hope! The last thing she said to me was, "Joanne, you have a tough year ahead of you, after that you will slowly be back to your regular life again."

We exchanged small talk, and then she went serious on me! Here is the good news, it is an estrogen fed tumor which she said was good as it is treatable with chemotherapy and also the pills that I am and will be taking for five years. The bad news was that it was grade 3, which meant that it was rapid growing. We had to move quickly. I was then sent down for bone scans and other tests.

Approximately three days later, I got the good news that it was only stage 2 and had only spread to the lymph nodes. Thank you God! I knew it would be OK. The plan of action is now a partial mastectomy with a total removal of all lymph nodes in that area. After that, three weeks recuperation, then four months of chemo, shortly after that 7 weeks of radiation everyday, Monday through Friday. Then five years of cancer medication to keep the estrogen at bay. Ok, I can do this!

That surgery went well, except that the big empty whole where the lymph nodes used to live and did their work, kept filling up with huge pockets of fluid like a baseball. I had to go back four times to have it drained. They told me eventually my body would figure out that this new hang out spot would become old and things would go back to normal.

After about six weeks it got better and better until it was normal again. Removal of these lymph nodes almost puts me in a higher risk of lymphedema, I have been told I have to take care of that, hopefully it never happens as it is irreversible.

However, in the meantime, the results of the first surgery were not good. The margins were not clear of cancer cells and I had to have another surgery and this time it was just the breast and not the lymph nodes. These pathology reports came back clear!

Time to prepare for the chemo! Bring it on! I met my oncology team under Dr. Daniel Morgenstern and felt the same as when I met the surgeon. I was in very good hands! Everyone at the Dana Farber at the Faulkner were wonderful and really cared about me being comfortable with the side effects. I had many pills for nausea and it really helped. We had so much fun and so many laughs. If you know me, you know that I am pretty funny. I brought that humor with me and it sure did help! Jim, my husband, came with me for every treatment and he is rather quiet and reserved (unlike me). He could not believe the jokes I was putting out there. Everyone loved us!

After the second treatment, I lost all my hair. However, I was prepared for that and handled it like a trooper when the little fringes fell all over my face one day as I got up in the morning. After

Thanksgiving, I got a really bad cold that I could not shake. Two weeks later I spiked 103 temp and had to be admitted to the hospital for four days. I had developed febrile neutropenia which means that the chemo had destroyed almost all of my white blood cells and I was getting very sick. I developed a couple of infections as well. They knew exactly how to get me back to normal, but it took four to five days to get me there. Although, I never thought I would get better. Blood transfusion, IV needles. Everytime I turned around more blood was being drawn. Finally, I came around and the white blood cells were up again to a normal count so that I could get out of the hospital. I had to miss one treatment in between, but after that we switched to a different type of chemo treatment and it did not bother my blood cells as much. I would always have to give myself a shot the next day to restore my white blood cells. Amazing strides in the treatment of cancer! Would I have been this fortunate ten years ago? I think not, so much research has been done in the last ten years in cancer it is amazing. Thank you to all those people who have contributed to fundraisers and made donations, it is such a good feeling when you participate in these events.

Cancer today is not a death sentence. Next week with more hope, victory and a grateful heart!

Joanne Connolly is a breast cancer survivor and publisher at The New England Real Estate Journal, Norwell, Mass.

Donations can be made to Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center at Brigham and Women's Faulkner Hospital  
10 Brookline Place  
West 6th Floor  
Brookline, MA 02445

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540