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DON'T DELAY, LIKE I DID

Lessons and reflections from a breast cancer survivor

By Marie Stevenson
For Daily Journal Media

I never thought I would say this, but I am a breast cancer survivor.

My name is Marie Stevenson, and my breast cancer journey began in April 2020. I was 49 years old and found a lump in my breast. It appeared suddenly, out of nowhere and had me puzzled. I came from a relatively cancer-free family. None of my close female relatives (mother, sisters, aunts) had ever been diagnosed with breast cancer – or any other type of cancer. I was not obese, ate a healthy diet, exercised daily and did not drink or smoke. I had taken a genetic test a few years earlier and did not have any genetic markers that would predispose me to cancer. Nevertheless, I was concerned and made a plan. The COVID-19 lockdowns had begun just a few weeks earlier, and the fear of COVID-19 in the country was palpable. The federal government was hoping to have a COVID-19 vaccine available by the end of the year. I decided I would bide my time, monitor the lump for any changes and go in to have it checked out after the vaccine became available.

However, on June 4, 2020, my world fell apart. A group of individuals from the Twin Cities area had been sending distressing emails to my husband and daughters during 2019 in an apparent attempt to stir up trouble. They succeeded. Finally, in a severe escalation in May 2020, without my knowledge or consent, they decided to contact someone from

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SUBMITTED

Marie Stevenson's husband, Craig, cared for her throughout her cancer journey, giving her the support and confidence she needed to fight her battle.

STEVENSON: *Urges to seek medical advice at first detection*

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my childhood, of whom I was deathly afraid. After finding out about this contact, I suffered a panic attack, severe anxiety, weight loss, nightmares and flashbacks to my childhood. Despite over a dozen emails from my husband and I, they refused to stop, and instead violated my privacy and safety by sending these private emails containing my contact information directly to this person. When I found out about the second contact, I was terrified and had another panic attack. I suffered a total of five panic attacks over the course of a year, due to the repeated contact.

The distress I endured from those events caused me to virtually forget about the lump. By the time I was able to get fully vaccinated against COVID-19 in May of 2021, I was still so distressed that I couldn't bring myself to go in for a checkup. I continued to struggle with anxiety, flashbacks and nightmares. My husband would wake up at night to find me fully awake and unable to get back to sleep. He would have to hold me to allow me to calm down enough to sleep. At times, I would check the lump, and due to the anxiety and fear about the other matters, I wondered if I would be better off if it was cancer, because it would put an end to my anxiety and distress. I was simply not in a good state of mind.

Despite my reticence, my husband finally convinced me to schedule a doctor visit for June 6, 2022, more than two years after the lump first appeared. I still hoped that coming from a relatively cancer-free family would mean that this lump was nothing to be concerned about. Unfortunately, I was terribly wrong.

In what turned into a whirlwind of events following my June 6 doctor visit, I was quickly scheduled for a diagnostic mammogram, ultrasound and two biopsies, which confirmed my worst fears – cancer – in more than one location. I was devastated. The realization finally dawned on me. Because I had postponed my diagnosis, the cancer had been given time to spread. Instead of one cancerous lump, there were three. Instead of a lumpectomy, I would have to endure a mastectomy.

My surgery took place on July 15, 2022, at Lake Region Healthcare in Fergus Falls. During the surgery, my surgeon performed a sentinel lymph node biopsy (SLNB) to determine if the cancer had spread to my lymph nodes. Unfortunately, it had, which means that the possibility of recurrence is significantly higher. The two-year delay in the diagnosis of my cancer was been a painful lesson, since once cancer reaches the lymph nodes, it can travel anywhere in the body.

My support through the entire cancer journey was incredible. The staff, doctors and my surgeon were very competent, caring and reassuring to me along the way. My husband of almost 35 years, Craig, normally a computer network technician and CEO of our own company, took time away from his work to care for all of my daily nursing needs. He was there for me in the hospital, he regularly changed the dressing on my wounds at home and provided me with the vital emotional support that I needed during that time. He repeatedly assured me that nothing would change how he felt about me — not the cancer, the surgery or whatever happened in the days going forward. It gave me the confidence I needed to fight this battle.

My older daughter recorded a number of piano songs that I could play to alleviate my stress in the early days after my diagnosis, while my younger daughter went on eBay to buy cancer hats for us, in case "we" had to go through chemo together. My extended family, consisting of my mother, five brothers and two sisters, were also very supportive, as I received a steady stream of encouraging texts, phone calls and emails.

As of now, I am on a hormone blocker (tamoxifen) to try to prevent a recurrence. The side effects are bothersome, but manageable. My family and I are praying that my cancer hasn't reached any other organs. I live each day wondering whether I could have prevented the mastectomy or the cancer's invasion of my lymph nodes by earlier detection. I will undoubtedly be looking over my shoulder for the remainder of my life, as I watch for signs of a possible recurrence. Even though I did not have any genetic or other risk factors, wasn't overweight, exercised daily and ate a healthy diet, I was still diagnosed with breast cancer at age 51, and it was present in my body at age 49.

According to the American Cancer Society, one in eight women will get breast cancer in their lifetime, more than 300,000 new cases are diagnosed each year and about 42,250 women die of breast cancer each year. Regular breast cancer screenings and prompt attention to suspicious lumps are important parts of making sure that a woman doesn't become a statistic.

Early breast cancer detection and treatment saves lives!

Because of my own experience, I want to alert other women to take proper care of their health. Don't put off your yearly mammogram, the way I did. Don't delay your diagnosis and treatment, the way I did. Most importantly, if you detect a lump, do not delay in seeking medical advice as I did, no matter what else might be going on in your life. My family is still intact and I hope to be around for my husband and my daughters for many years to come. If I had waited any longer or if my cancer had been more aggressive or more widespread, the outcome might have been much different.