

# Our Dance with Chance

by Brenda Denzler

She's been my friend since we worked together back in 2010. Though I retired in 2014, we have kept in touch, bonded by our shared work experience and the fact that we both have adult sons with autism. Last week Brigid told me that we now share another bond. She has been diagnosed with breast cancer.

Brigid is no newbie to the world of cancer. She helped her mother through at least three different cancers. But now she was going to be the patient—not a supporter. The diagnosis stunned her, and she asked me to go with her to the first meeting with her treatment team.

When I was diagnosed, the learning curve was unbelievably steep for me. Information went in one ear and out the other—often over my head. Since that time, I've devoted many, many hours to becoming a well-informed and knowledgeable breast cancer patient. I used that knowledge on Brigid's behalf this week.

As one doctor and nurse after another paraded into the exam room to introduce themselves and share their bits of information about Brigid's diagnosis and treatment plan, I sat in the corner, scribbling notes furiously. Because now I know what is important in the barrage of information that confronts new cancer patients, I knew what to write down, how to show its relationship to the other bits of info—and sometimes, I knew how to speak up and ask clarifying questions.

Brigid sat stoically—even cheerfully—on the exam table, her hospital gown open in the front to allow every doctor to easily palpate her tumor and search for swollen lymph nodes. Between “gropes” (as she called them wryly when we were alone), she pulled the two sides of the gown together and chatted pleasantly with the health care professional of the moment. But I could see beyond her calm, pleasant exterior.

Triple negative, the doctor informed her, and Brigid's foot started to tap wildly in the air. (Aw, #@\*^! I thought.) Grade 3, the doctor said. (#@\*^! I thought again, trying not to let my face betray my dismay.) The foot continued to wag nervously.

“Is that bad?” Brigid asked me when the doctor had left, her pleasant smile replaced by a look of concern.

I don't pull punches.

“Yes,” I said. “It means that you won't benefit from anti-hormonal therapies like your mom took. The cancer isn't feeding on your hormones, so there's no point. Because of this, triple negs like you tend to be harder to cure. But don't be too discouraged. They are discovering that not all triple negative is created equal. For reasons they don't entirely understand yet, some triple negs do quite well in the long term—even staying cancer-free for years. I know someone who was triple neg with IBC, and she's doing fine almost a decade later. Others don't do so well.”

“The point is, even though you're triple neg, it's not an entirely bleak picture. And they don't find any swollen lymph nodes that might suggest the cancer has spread, so that's also good. You have reason to hope.”

More doctors and nurses entered and left the exam room, sometimes doubling up and having to stop to sort themselves out in their eagerness to get another new patient informed, processed, and on the way to treatment—Brigid as pleasant and smiling as ever when they were around. The perfect, calm, cooperative patient.

Finally, six hours after we had arrived, we walked out the front door of the cancer center. As we walked to the car, Brigid looked down, took deep breaths and exhaled audibly. “One step at a time,” she muttered to herself in a shaky voice.

Neither one of us had eaten anything all day, so we treated ourselves to supper at our favorite restaurant. As we waited for our orders, Brigid stared out the big plate glass windows onto the busy sidewalk and street outside. She asked me if she was Stage III.

“No,” I said. “They never said what stage you are, but with the info they gave you, we can look that up online later. What they said was that your tumor is a Grade 3.”

She looked at me blankly.

“Think of it like this,” I tried to explain. “The stage is talking about your whole body and

what the cancer is doing all over it—both where the tumor is and where it could be, like your lymph nodes. The grade is talking just about the tumor itself and nothing else. Remember the doctor said that first grade is a slow-growing tumor, second grade is growing at a moderate rate, and third grade is growing very rapidly? Your tumor is a 3—growing very fast.”

“Oh,” she said. Her eyes brimmed with tears. A moment later, she began to sob quietly.

“You know, I don't know if I want to do this. I mean, is there any point? My mom would get one cancer, get rid of it, and then in a year or two get another one. Over and over again. All she did was battle one cancer after another. Is it worth it for me to even fight this?”

“I'm so sorry,” I said, getting up and giving her a hug. “I know this is terrible. And it is serious... but it's not hopeless. I wouldn't give up on treatment right now, with this first cancer. There's a reasonable chance that you can beat this thing for several years—and possibly permanently. And if that doesn't happen, then there is time in the future for you to make these kinds of decisions. You don't have to keep doing this indefinitely.”

She thought about this for a moment. “Truth?” I said. “You are living your life based on chance, now. I mean, we all do.”

“I know,” she said with a small snuffle. “We take chances all the time. All of us do. When we get into our cars...”

“Yes,” I said. “And when we step into our showers, when we cook... but it's different for us. Most of the time everyone does this little, unconscious dance with the probabilities of risk and reward in their lives. It's a little dance with

chance. And everyone is completely oblivious to what they are actually doing. They just do it.

“You and I don't have that luxury any more. With cancer, probabilities and chance are right here”—I put my hand up within an inch of my nose—“staring us in the face, and hard to ignore. There is a chance that these treatments are going to get rid of your cancer—and a chance that they won't. There's a chance that even if they do, it won't be for very long, as well as a chance that it will be for years and years. And there's no way to know, for sure, which of these is going to happen to you. You only have the probabilities, based upon your membership now in a particular group: triple neg breast cancer patients. You have to figure out how to move your life forward based on this very intense and uncertain dance with chance.”

Chance has not always been kind to Brigid, as it hasn't for most of us. She sat and stared at her half-eaten supper, running her fork lazily through the hummus.

I took a chance that sugar wouldn't stoke the fires that feed cancer. I had baklava for dessert.

*Brenda Denzler was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer in 2009. She became a cancer survivor on the very day she was diagnosed.*

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