



Cancer Survivors Day June 7

Survivors beat the odds with hope, support network



When you think of the word survivor, what does it mean to you?

Are there some days when you wake up in the morning you don't want to get out of bed?

Perhaps you have to do something that you really don't want to do...go to the doctors, do your taxes, pay your bills, take a test, look for a

job, spring clean the house, or weed the garden.

Most of us just get right up and face what we have to do and by the end of the day, we say to ourselves, I have made it through the day, I survived.

On another note some people refer to being a survivor as making it through a misfortune; existing; being alive when the odds are against us!

The chances that people can survive a plane crash are not likely but "The Miracle on the Hudson" proved us all wrong. Or when people receive an organ to sustain their life; one's misfortune is another's gain.

When people live to tell, everyone becomes connected in some way, relationships form sometimes for small amounts of time but some for a lifetime. Every day, people survive major medical problems, overcoming the odds. I am a survivor. You can be too.

I am a survivor.

Where did the 10 years go? I can't believe it. Yes, I am a 10 year breast cancer survivor. It was 10 years ago that I thought that I was going to die. I had a lump in my left breast and 17 nodes under my arm that were cancerous.

After the shock of it all, I knew I was going to fight...fight to live; fight to survive. Treatment, rest, eating right, exercise and keeping myself very busy was my routine for 18 months. Keeping a positive mind; counting my blessings and looking at the "glass half full" instead of half empty became very important to me.

I was and still am a good patient. I have taken ownership of my health. At first I saw my doctor every three months and then every six.

I never missed an appointment, scheduled scan or test; I kept a journal, and always made lists of questions for my doctor. Each time I visited my doctor I had a medical report including the following:

- Date of doctor visit
- Date of diagnosis
- Date of last chemotherapy
- Date last seen by the doctor
- Medications
- Exercise
- Medical problems
- List of upcoming tests and prescriptions needed for next visit
- Next appointment

My doctor appreciated my report and always said to me "You are so organized." Communication is important. Because there is limited time to actually talk to your doctor, writing information down makes the office visit smoother and more engaging. As of today, I am still doing my reports for my doctors.

It takes a village.

I didn't survive alone. If it wasn't for my family, friends and doctors, I could have never made it.

It was my next door neighbor who agreed to shave my head; another neighbor who took me to all of my chemos; the neighbors across the street who sent me food or planted flowers in my garden to cheer me up; all of my friends who took turns staying with me; my friends who tried on my wigs to make me laugh (I do have pictures); my friend who went with me to every doctor's appointment; my family who drove me to places when I didn't feel well or brought dinner and visited with me; my cousin who came to sit with me to watch the Fourth of July fireworks on television; my friends who walked the Race for the Cure with me three months after my last chemo; the prayers, the cards; the flowers..I can go on and on. So you see it took many people to help me survive.

A connection to others.

Once you are afflicted with a life-threatening experience, your life

is definitely placed in perspective. It is not about how much money you have or how successful you are — it's who you have around you — it's the connection to life. It is not only the people that you know; it's the people that you don't know.

I have met many of my "sisters" all over the United States the last 10 years. My "sisters" are breast cancer survivors. Sisters always hug each other. They always feel a bond because they know what it is like to have cancer. They know how to survive. Sometimes that hug has to last a life time for you may never see them again.

You can be a survivor.

A mammogram saved my life. If another year would have passed, I wouldn't be here today. One of the Center for Healthy Aging's "10 Keys" to Healthy Aging is "Participate in Cancer Screening." Testing for cancer may save your life and lead you to a "Healthier Tomorrow." Take ownership of your health, practice the "10 Keys" to Healthy

Aging.

I dedicate this article to all of my family, friends, students and doctors who are always there for me. One does not survive alone. A special thanks to Dr. Alan Kunschner who saved my life.

This column was written by Constance Bayles, PhD, program director for the Center for Healthy Aging. For more information on this article, please call 412-624-3217. The Center for Healthy Aging is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control. For questions or more information contact David J. Fetterman, community outreach coordinator at the Center for Healthy Aging at 412-383-3121 or visit www.healthyaging.pitt.edu.