

Breast cancer survivors find different ways to cope

Sometimes you gotta laugh when you feel like crying

MORGANTON - Leigh Mazaleski doesn't mind playing the "C-Card" for laughs - or for a leather sofa! She may joke in front of other cancer survivors about how the sofa only cost her "one boob and all my hair" but she's very serious when it comes to talking about cancer and how it has changed her life.

"How you experience cancer is all in the way you look at it," says this wife and mother of four. "I have chosen, at whatever cost, to focus on what cancer has given to me, and not what cancer has taken away."

What cancer has taken away was a breast, and the treatments meant Leigh lost her hair. But what cancer has given to her is her identity, she says.

"Cancer has really awakened me to who I really am," she said. "I didn't realize that I could make a lot of other people laugh. I realize now how important humor is. Stress can be lessened in tough situations. When you can laugh, it's a whole lot better than taking anti-depressants."

Leigh found a lump on Mother's Day weekend two years ago. "I knew it was something different, and I knew it was something I needed to have checked out," she said. "I immediately was worried. My reaction was - I can't have cancer, I have four children. They were involved in football and soccer. It was not something that was going to work into my life very well."

Not two weeks later, Leigh had a modified radical mastectomy and started chemotherapy shortly afterward. "I had the option of having a lumpectomy, radiation and chemo, or a mastectomy, no radiation but still chemo. I didn't know what to do," she said. "That's a hard decision, but I wanted to do the safest thing even if it meant losing a breast. I have children, so I didn't want to mess around."

Leigh decided to have her surgery and receive

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LEIGH MAZALESKI
BREAST CANCER SURVIVOR

cancer treatment at Blue Ridge HealthCare, where her husband, Jay, is an employee in rehabilitation services. "I honestly just love the people who work in the Cancer Center," she said. "They understand. When a cancer patient walks in those doors, they know that that's one place where people understand they are feeling just yucky. They can be themselves in that office."

She also based her decision on the "big city treatment with a small town feel."

"You hear things like 'I'm not going to have medical care in a small town.' But I think people are cheating themselves sometimes because there's good care here," she said. "And I'm used to small town friendliness. I need to feel cared about - as well as feel like they are knowledgeable. So if there's no warmth, nobody asks you any questions about your family or anything, and they just stick to the medicine - as a cancer patient that's hard to deal with. This is a long haul."

Only two months after her surgery, Leigh returned to her job as a speech pathologist for North Carolina's Children's Development Services Agency. "I felt horrible," she said. "But I love the children I work with so for my own sake as much as for work's sake, I would get happy

when I would see some beautiful little child. It took some time to come back from the mastectomy and I was working when I was bald."

For Leigh it was very important to not give in to the cancer, to not let it affect her job as a speech pathologist and as a mother. "I can't give into being tired when I have four children," she said.

Her husband and her friends helped her tremendously. "My friends gave us a membership to the city pool so that my children could go swimming," she said. "My husband took the children on some day trips rather than a big vacation. If it hadn't been for him it would have been harder. He automatically picked up where I left off. I didn't have to ask him to, he just knew he had to - that's just the kind of dad he is."

Now Leigh can look back on those years as growing years for her, defining who she is today. She used to think worrying about her looks was vain. "But I was struggling to feel feminine," she said. "I was bald and had one breast - that's a big insult to your ability to feel feminine."

She decided to have reconstructive surgery, and she started paying attention to clothes and jewelry. "The plastic surgery took this person who felt like a freak on the inside (bald, one

breast, scarred) to someone who lost 20 pounds, started caring about her hair, choice of colors in fashion, and accessories," she said. "Now from the outside no one would ever know I had cancer. If I hadn't had cancer I don't know if I'd ever have paid attention to those things."

"So after I had my reconstruction, I realized that I was almost 50 and I still looked decent," she said. "It was a big boost to my self esteem."

It also became a way for her to thumb her nose at cancer. "I was saying cancer is not going to tell me that I can't look like a woman and that I can't feel alive," she said.

Feeling alive has become very important, and Leigh has become more adventurous, willing to try new things. She participated in a fly-fishing class (the casting motion is helpful to build muscles damaged by the mastectomy) and she's going kayaking - a sport she once considered too dangerous.

She's written poetry and joined a writer's group. That led to her becoming a stand-up comedienne. She entertained almost 500 people at National Cancer Survivors Day and made them laugh at the "one boob and all my hair" joke.

"My writing sort of led to my comedy routine. I'd share funny things that happened to me and I would write it or tell people about it and they would laugh and I thought - maybe that's what this is all supposed to be about. I always wondered why the Lord wanted me to write," she said.

"I just feel strongly that I can do this," Leigh added. "If someone asked me to speak in front of 20,000 people I'd do it in a heartbeat. I have this vision of making a really big group of people who have had cancer laugh. I feel like that's what all my writing and life experiences have been about - to make people laugh about things they never thought they'd laugh about."



Leigh Mazaleski says the cancer diagnosis made her want to live life to the fullest every day.

TONY GLENN | BLUE RIDGE HEALTHCARE

Marie Biggs: Faith and family make life worth living

MORGANTON - Marie Biggs is a 16-year breast cancer survivor, who found out five years ago that her cancer had come back in her lungs. Enduring a mastectomy and the side effects of chemotherapy, she says she is blessed. She's lived to see five generations in her family, she married a good man, she loves her family and she's had a good life.

"I've enjoyed life and I continue to enjoy it," she said recently at Blue Ridge HealthCare's Cancer Center. "This is the first time I've had to come back for anything other than my scheduled treatments. The cancer is there all the time, but I think I've done good."

But there's no doubt that life with cancer and chemotherapy is hard. "I've had hot flashes, back pain," she said. "Today I'm hurting under my arm and all the way around the back of my neck."

Food doesn't taste as good, and she has strange sensa-

tions. "If I wash my hands after a treatment and dry them with a towel, it feels like there is cornmeal on the towel - kind of gritty, you know? It makes me think I need to wash my towel again. It's an odd sensation."

Marie's daughter, Carolyn Clark, brought her mother in after a port that had been surgically inserted years before for her chemo became infected. She and sister, Rita Nichols, a retired nurse, take turns bringing their mother for her treatments. Clark says her mother is a real trooper. "She will be 88 years old on June 29," Clark said. "She still drives, still lives by herself. She still has her mind about her."

"Oh, I have a chemo brain," Marie says laughing. Marie was diagnosed with cancer in 1991. She knew something was wrong in 1990, but didn't tell anyone until after Christmas. "I didn't tell anybody," she said. "Not my husband, not any of my family. I was going to

have one more good Christmas with my family because I thought I would die."

After the holidays, she told her husband she needed to go to the doctor. "My husband took me," she said. "The doctor said there was something in there and it needed to come out. I had a mastectomy. We cried a whole week, and then decided we'd do the best we could. I had a good husband."

Marie was treated for five years with Tamoxifen, and she was in remission until the reoccurrence of the cancer was found in her lung.

"Tamoxifen is a medication taken by mouth that blocks estrogen receptors that progressed cancer is dependent on," said Connie Whisnant, RN, Oncology Services Clinical Coordinator. "Not every breast cancer patient has what we call positive ER/PR receptors. It depends on what the stage of the cancer the patient has, and what

hormone receptors are present. Marie's lung cancer actually is the breast cancer that has spread to the lung."

Unfortunately, breast cancer seems to run in the family. Marie's daughter, Ellen, died last year, and she has two granddaughters who have been diagnosed with the disease. "They're doing great," Clark said. "They caught it early. The people here in the Cancer Center were just wonderful helping them."

Marie finds strength in her faith and from praying. She tells those going through cancer to get good medical care and to pray. She's a faithful member of Amherst Baptist Church.

Clark says other cancer patients will call her mother to tell her what they are going through. "They ask her if this or that is normal, what should I expect next. And if Mama has the same symptoms, then they seem to be fine with it."

"It's just good for them to know that somebody has been through the same thing," Marie added. "There are two women in my church who have breast cancer. They call me every week at least once."

Marie's love of family keeps her going, too. "I love them so much," she said.

"My Mama is tough," Clark said. "She's not had a bed of roses, but she's had the love of family, friends, and people like Connie and the folks here at the Cancer Center."

Marie says it's been easier on her and her family that she received her cancer treatments here in Burke County. She's pleased with her care and doesn't hesitate to tell anyone who asks. "I wouldn't take a step out of Burke County. I get good care right here," she said. "Three nurses met me at the door because I'd never been sick, and a doctor was here within five minutes. Tell me you'd get that kind of treatment in a big city."



Marie Biggs