

CANCER MAKES YOU APPRECIATE LIFE

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My diagnosis with throat cancer was a huge shock. I had never had a serious illness, I rarely got a cold or flu, I never smoked and was a very small drinker and my parents are still alive and healthy at 85. Likewise, it had never crossed my doctor's mind that the unusual sensation in my throat was cancer, but a specialist confirmed it immediately after he looked down my throat. He'd seen it many times before and told me it needed to be treated with a course of chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

After researching my options, I decided that the best place to be treated was the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre in Melbourne. My husband, John, had just lost his job in the construction industry and as we have no children we decided we had nothing to lose by moving to Melbourne for treatment. The Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre was like a breath of fresh air and offered the most advanced treatment available. We were soon arranging to move from Sydney to a flat next to the hospital. I became obsessed with surviving – nothing else mattered. Luckily, I was given a good prognosis, the type of head and neck cancer that I had has a good survival rate. Still, I took everything that was offered in way of treatment. I didn't leave anything to chance.

I've always been very interested in health and nutrition and decided that once I had followed western medicine, I would try more natural therapies to help my body recover. A friend's husband had attended the Life and Living cancer healing retreat and I decided to do it with my husband in 2003.

From the time that I was diagnosed with cancer and all through the treatment I was unable to sleep more than two hours a night. So by the time John and I attended the retreat, I hadn't slept properly for five months. However, I found that doing the meditation during the course was so relaxing and calming that I felt quite refreshed by it, even though I still had trouble sleeping. I thought I knew a lot about nutritional advice, but I learnt a lot more and still use their recipes. For two years after the retreat, I followed the Foundation's advice religiously, cutting stimulants out of my diet, only using organic foods...I've relaxed a bit now, but they gave me principles for life.

Being with other people who had been through, or who were going through, a similar rollercoaster ride put things into perspective. There were people at the retreat who had brain tumours and aggressive breast cancers. I was in remission and soon realised there were people a lot worse off than me, I felt as though I was one of the lucky ones.

The retreat was also very confronting at times, for example the death and dying session. I was aware that some of the people were seriously ill with cancer and probably would not recover. It forced me to face my fears and gave me some understanding of the dying process, and of course, the mere fact of discussing the issues around death and dying was helpful. I had some cognitive behavioural therapy some months after the retreat and now recognise that the Death and Dying session enabled me to analyse my thoughts and face my fears by discussing them with others.

Although I am technically now cancer free, I still live with my cancer every day – both physically and emotionally. I can't forget my cancer, but I try not to let it affect the way I live. I always wanted to give back to the medical profession because of what they did for me, so I started doing volunteer work for the Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney. I don't think you are ever the same after you've had cancer, which is good. Cancer makes you appreciate life more.