

STAGE 4 BREAST CANCER

I'M STILL HERE!

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I was diagnosed with Stage Four breast cancer in July, 2011. I had been sick for some time with swollen breasts, but I was stubborn and felt confident I could heal myself naturally. Of course, I never thought I had cancer. I was going through a divorce at the time and was studying and generally leading a pretty stressful life. My relationships were up in the air and I was drinking and eating all the wrong things. I was running around like a headless chicken, so I figured my swollen breasts were a symptom of stress...Maybe an infection.

Being told I had cancer was a huge shock, it spun everything around. When you have Stage Four Breast Cancer it's basically 'No hope Obi Wan Kenobi'. The doctors' prognosis was palliative care... They told me they would try to keep me stable. The tumour in my left breast was vicious; doctors said it was too big to operate. In order to have a mastectomy, the tumour would need to shrink. They offered me chemotherapy, but they weren't 100 per cent certain that would work as I had lots of cancer underneath my armpit. I also had lymphedema in my left arm, which had ballooned to three times the size of my right arm.

I declined the offer of chemotherapy and I knew palliative care wasn't for me. I'm a determined person and certainly wasn't going to lie down and just do what doctors told me to do. I thought 'Okay, I've been dealt this now, let's do the best that we can, if I end up in palliative care, so be it. But I will give it my best shot.' My doctors were amazed at how fearless I was, but I just knew I had to get my head right. I told my doctors that I had to find out what my options were and I was pleased when they honoured my choices. I told them that when I had made my decision, I would come back to them. I then booked into *Life and Living Cancer Healing Retreat* at The Gawler Foundation. My family helped me pack my belongings for the trip from Queensland to Victoria. It was the best thing I ever did.

I was made aware fairly quickly that most of the other participants on the retreat were coming to the end of their cancer journey. I know there are five people who were at the same retreat who have since passed away. I felt very lucky that I was doing the program at the start of my journey and I fully embraced everything that was offered to me. I realised that I had to encompass everything, not only the radiotherapy and chemotherapy, but also meditation, diet and exercise. It's strange, because even though I was abusing my body at the time, I still wanted to do things naturally. I was gob smacked by what I learnt on the retreat. But, I couldn't imagine how life changing this experience would ultimately be for me. My attitude was very stubborn; I needed to accept what was happening to me. I swallowed humble pie and became open and accepting, which took a huge weight off my shoulders immediately.

I returned home brimming with confidence and positivity. I spoke to my family and decided to make an appointment with an oncologist. I was ready to try chemotherapy. The skin around my breast had been compromised and doctors had to take photos every three weeks with the chemo treatment, to see how the breast was reacting. The breast surgeon was overwhelmed when the tumour started to shrink! Every photo showed improvements on the skin, it was amazing! I was very positive and followed everything I

learnt at the Foundation to the letter. I meditated, I ate really well and didn't put anything in my mouth I knew I couldn't have. Everyone was in awe about what was happening to me. I was given anti-nausea medication but I was never sick. I was lucky to have extremely positive friends and family who were with me all the time.

At the end of December, 2011 I had my last session of chemotherapy. Miraculously, the doctor who had told me the tumour in my breast was inoperable was now telling me I was ready for surgery. I was booked in to have a mastectomy in January, 2012. I had a wonderful Christmas and then had surgery as planned. The surgeon was amazed! The day after surgery, he told me that the tumour was .2 millimetres in size...It had shrunk! All the cancer in the lymph nodes under my arm had gone. The doctor took two nodes out to test them and could see where the cancer had been, but it was now all gone, there was no cancer underneath. He said 'I don't understand what you are doing, but keep doing it! You've been remarkable'. I felt absolutely fantastic, but didn't doubt that I would recover. I felt no fear and embraced everything that was offered to me. I was very fortunate that I had amazing support from family and friends, it was wonderful – I couldn't help but get well.

After the operation, I had radiation therapy every day for five weeks. The radiation was very intense and the burns I received were very severe, but I knew I had to embrace everything if I wanted to be well. Once the radiation therapy had finished and I'd healed, I again travelled to the Foundation to attend the *Life and Living – The Next Step*. I was feeling a little bit off and didn't have much energy, but the therapists at the foundation offered wonderful advice and helped me get on the straight and narrow again.

While visiting my sister in Canberra, I became very ill and was hospitalised. Doctors found little cancer spots in my brain and in my spinal fluid. Generally, with Stage Four Cancer, you have tumours in your other organs, but these cancer spots were very minimal. I had radiation treatment to my brain and to the base of my spine and was sent home to Queensland. One oncologist told me that people with cancer in their spine and brain stem generally only live two months, but that was close to a year ago now.

Today, I have very minimal symptoms and lead quite a normal life. My doctors are very happy with how I am doing. I had tests last year, but they were inconclusive. People have asked what cancer has taught me and what pulled me through the dark days. I'd have to say the love from my two sons, my family and my friends was paramount. I have learnt that life is not just about working, getting money and paying bills. *Life is for living.*