

My Cancer Story

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I remember my first touch by cancer. My son was in first grade and a fellow classmate of his was diagnosed with cancer. A short four months later, Adam passed away at the age of six...I was shocked. How unfair this was, you see... Adam's father was a doctor...even he couldn't protect his child. The school provided grief counseling for the students...that's when I learned the terrifying statistic...“one in four people will be diagnosed with cancer”...one in four! I thought how terrible that was. I was so thankful that our family was healthy.

We moved to Virginia, I meet my neighbor “Jon”. That first spring, Jon and his family invited my family to join their Relay for Life team. How crazy, another person I now knew had cancer. At Relay, I saw Jon walk the first lap as a survivor; I was so moved by his courage. It was there that I discovered “Relay for Life” and was inspired by the community coming together to fight cancer. I won't ever forget my first Relay. I had diligently recruited within my circle of family and friends to make a donation to such a wonderful cause. I was actually very surprised at both the number of donations I received, as well as the heartfelt stories that came with the donations. The purpose of this fight hit home once again. Later, when the announcer spoke encouraging words and the stadium lights were turned off silence blanketed the stadium as it became illuminated by the warm candle in each white bag. It became a time to remember those who had lost their battle against this ugly disease and to provide hope to those still fighting their battle. What a powerful climax to witness, the impact that cancer had on that entire stadium was something I will never forget as long as I Relay.

About six months after that first Relay, while instructing one of my morning fitness classes, I realized I had a lump on my neck while taking my pulse. I, being the self proclaimed doctor that I am, figured it was a nodule on my larynx from instructing 9 years of fitness classes without using a microphone. For those of you that know me...no need to tell you I do not need a microphone!

Well, the doctor didn't hesitate a bit...after two biopsies, something happened that changed my life...I was now “one of the four”...in August 1998, I was told I had papillary thyroid cancer. How could this be, I exercise, eat right; never smoked a day in my life...you know...all the things you should do to stay healthy. Sorry to say, cancer doesn't care about that.

Within two weeks, the wonderful military doctors at Langley AFB removed my thyroid. One week after the surgery, I swallowed radioactive iodine and the doctors told me I had no trace of cancer left. It was indeed great news; unfortunately, I also had no thyroid and started a life-long regiment of taking synthroid to help regulate my body's metabolism. Six weeks after having my thyroidectomy, I was back to instructing fitness classes. That next year's Relay, now my second, was my first to participate in the survivor's lap. I felt special as I walked that lap with my neighbor, Jon. Both wearing our purple Relay sashes, I was overwhelmed at the support, the celebration of life, my life. Now from the

perspective of a cancer survivor, I was acutely aware of the people connected to my life. For that moment, that night, all the people in the stadium were focused on cancer. But it was not to just remember the tragedies, but to celebrate the fight...the hope, the success, the survivors...and realism there will be a cure.

I've now attended many Relays, from Virginia to Nevada and now in Florida. Each year, I'm excited and amazed at the dedication, thoughtfulness, and volunteerism I witness in the community. The months of effort, personal sacrifices, support from friends and businesses, come together for 18 hours, to celebrate an achievement that the whole community can be proud of.

I have so many wonderful Relay memories, from my best friend surprising me by flying in from 1,000 miles away to attend my first Relay as a survivor, to walking a lap with my son and him counting the over 85 bags with my name on them...and him telling me that it was like having 85 of my family and friends there cheering me on.

Cancer...something that can rob anyone, any age, any race. Every year that I Relay, it reaffirms how lucky I am to be a survivor. I always walk that first lap thinking of how Relay for Life represents the hope that those lost to cancer will never be forgotten, and that those who face cancer will be supported, and that one day, cancer will be eliminated.

If, as a Relay, we gave one person comfort dealing with their fight with cancer, we succeeded. If we raised \$1 that helped fund the cure for cancer, we succeeded. If we put a smile on one survivor's face, we succeeded. If we helped the world remember one person we lost to cancer, we succeeded. I am proud to say I'm a Relayer and I will Relay for the rest of my life. I don't ignore it, I don't deny it, and I refuse to believe my kids (and their kids) won't see the day when a cure for cancer is discovered. I might not be the one who finds the cure, but I will be part of the cure.