

CHAPTER 1

My Story

Prior to the spring of 2008 when I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I could count on one hand the number of women (or men) I personally knew who had also been diagnosed. When I was growing up, Mrs. Malone lived just two houses down from us on the same side of our street. At the time, she had three adorable little girls whom I loved to baby-sit. They were the type of family that was close and always doing something fun. After I married and moved out of town, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. I remember my mom telling me that she had undergone a mastectomy (without reconstruction). I couldn't wait to come back into town so I could sit and visit with her. When I saw her, she was propped up in bed and surrounded with fluffy white pillows. Although she still had the same cheerful smile, I remember being surprised at how sick she was.

That was when I made the decision that if I were ever diagnosed with cancer, I would refuse treatment and just let nature take its course. Isn't it funny how we always think we know exactly what we would do if we were in a particular situation? That is, until we get there. Then in a split-second we change our minds and do the exact opposite.

Some 40 years later, when I was diagnosed with cancer, I totally disregarded my earlier decision. At that point all I could think about was living.

Life Is Good

It was still dark outside when my alarm buzzed. No hitting the snooze! I was wide-awake. That day I was on top of the world! I was to be interviewed in a guest spot on Atlanta's 11Alive News on WXIA (NBC). It was April 1, 2008, and I had been asked to provide tips to help all of metro Atlanta clean their clutter and get organized for spring. I was sure Oprah would be calling me next!

To celebrate my (imagined) fame, later in the day my daughter, Liz and her three boys would be arriving from Spartanburg, South Carolina. Okay, they really didn't know I was going to be famous; they were just coming for spring break. Topping off the day, I was speaking that evening to a networking group on how to stay focused and positive. It was bound to be a long day, but I was excited. I was doing work that I loved and spending time with my family. It just doesn't get any better than that. I thought, "Life is good ... really good!"

The TV interview went well, but (perhaps not surprisingly) Oprah didn't call. Even though I was pressed for time, I stopped by T.J. Maxx on my way home, adding an extra errand into an already full day. As I pulled my car into a parking space, my cell phone rang. It was a call from my internist.

"I would like for you to have another chest x-ray. The one taken last week during your annual physical is not totally clear. I've seen this happen before and I really don't think there is anything to worry about, but it's better to be sure."

I scheduled the appointment for the Friday after my daughter and the boys left. I saw no reason to interrupt our fun for something so routine.

The day continued as planned; little did I realize at the time that it was going to be a day I would long remember.

A Day of Discovery

Just before going to bed that same night, while rubbing lotion across my chest, I felt a slight, soft bulge above my right breast. At first, I thought it was just a muscle. I felt my left breast to see if perhaps I was developing asymmetrically ... before remembering that I was 50 years past puberty. There was no sign of a similar bulge on the left side. I was not overly concerned and made a mental note (which I hoped I would remember) to tell my doctor about it on Friday while having my chest x-ray repeated. It was no big deal.

Fortunately, my second chest x-ray was negative, but my doctor was quite concerned about the lump I had found and the fact that it wasn't detected during my previous visit. During that visit, my breast exam was performed with me lying down. The lump could only be felt when I was sitting or standing. Although my doctor believed it was a small mass consisting of just fatty tissue, she ordered a mammogram and ultrasound. I am forever thankful she chose to take an aggressive approach. Without her actions, it could have been years before my cancer was found.

Driving to my appointment, I thought back on how I used to dread mammograms. It wasn't just the discomfort, but the panic attacks. My breast would be reconfigured to resemble a disposable paper plate held securely in place between two ice-cold sledgehammers. What did they think, I might escape and run bare-breasted through the halls? Once locked into place, panic would set in as I envisioned the fire alarm piercing the silence of the hospital just after the technician left the room to "take the picture" so she could avoid the radiation. There I would be – abandoned, flattened into place, hugging a frigid piece of metal. With this horrifying thought, I would beg the technician to talk to me continuously the entire time she was out of sight so I would know she had not deserted me. Thank goodness today's machines have an automatic release, and with digital mammography, the technicians never leave the room.

About ten years ago, I changed to a new medical facility where the mammogram technician went to great lengths to minimize the discomfort and still get a clear image. Too bad she can't be cloned. Since then, I almost—but not totally—don't mind the ordeal and actually look forward to seeing her. Besides, she is like an old friend I only get to see once a year.

That day we exchanged friendly small talk. I showed her the fatty tissue in question. Three different times she used all her strength to pull and stretch my skin so she could capture an image of my mysterious little fatty tissue, but because it was situated so high on my chest wall, it was just not possible.

Disappointed that she wasn't able to get an image of it, she walked me across the hall to the ultrasound room. My new tech performed the ultrasound and soon left the room to discuss the results with the radiologist. She returned with a smile, telling me I was free to leave. Her parting words were, "If there are any significant findings, your doctor will get in touch with you." Although I was not told at the time, the ultrasound did reveal something suspicious inside "my little fatty tissue."

Suspicious

Completely unconcerned, I flew to Seattle the following day to give the opening keynote at a women's conference. The audience was wonderful and the program a success. Pleased with the results of my presentation, I took a cab to the airport to fly back to Atlanta. It had been another great day.

At airport security, I put my jacket, purse, shoes, and cell phone in a bin on the security conveyor belt. Just as my possessions were disappearing into the dark cavern of the x-ray machine, my cell phone rang. With a quick glance, I saw my internist's name pop up on the caller ID and immediately felt a weird sensation in the pit of my stomach. I grabbed my phone and yelled, "I'm going through airport security; call me right back!"

Fortunately, I quickly made it through security and found an unoccupied gate. After waiting for what seemed an eternity, my phone finally rang again. I heard her say, “The results of your ultrasound revealed a questionable area that needs to be checked. I want you to see a breast surgeon as soon as possible. If you don’t know of one, I can recommend one.” I quickly explained I would only be home for the night and would be flying back out early the next morning for a weekend conference. I wouldn’t be home until Monday night. I promised to make an appointment as soon as I got back.

For the first time, I felt a little concern ... a slight uncertainty. So far, I had not shared any of my office visits, repeat x-ray, mammograms, or ultrasound with anyone, including my husband, Jim. He had so many things on his mind; I just didn’t see a need for him or anyone else to worry unnecessarily. Also, I didn’t want to risk having anyone look at me and wonder if I had cancer, or worse yet, ask me every day if the fatty tissue had grown, how I was doing, or if I was concerned or scared. It was my little secret and I liked knowing something no one else knew. Besides, there still was no reason to think it was all that serious.

Unexpected News

The next thing on my to-do list, having nothing to do with the “breast” situation, was to see my gynecologist for my annual exam. My appointment just happened to be on the same morning as my first appointment with the breast surgeon. Of course, I told my gynecologist about my new lump. She examined it and said, “That’s probably just some fatty tissue. Nothing I would worry about.”

To add even more confusion to my medical history, she did show concern about some minor post-menopausal spotting I was having. To my surprise, she insisted I have a D&C as soon as possible. I left her office feeling less concerned about my little fatty tissue and more concerned about having the D&C.

I had just enough time for a quick lunch before my appointment with the breast surgeon. As soon as I entered his office, his staff treated me more like a friend than a patient. It was just what I needed at the time. When the doctor walked into the examining room, I liked him immediately. He had a gentle voice, a warm smile, and a genuine persona. After he examined my little fatty tissue, he suggested I have a core needle biopsy, which is generally the first procedure performed for tissue diagnosis. It is less invasive and often avoids a surgical procedure, plus it would allow him to know exactly what he was dealing with before considering surgery.

Instead, I asked if he could surgically remove it. By this time, I was tired of feeling the lump on a daily (if not hourly) basis. My thinking was that I just didn't want it anymore, cancer or no cancer. His impression was that clinically, my lump did not appear worrisome. Based on this fact and my concern, he agreed to an excisional biopsy (surgically removing the lump). For once I felt empowered and in control.

So, I found myself scheduled for an excisional biopsy on Monday, April 28 and a D&C on the following Monday, May 5th . If both ended up requiring additional surgery, I was wondering, which would come first, a mastectomy or a hysterectomy? It was sort of like the chicken and the egg.

'Fessing Up

Once I realized my situation had gone from routine to questionable, I was having second thoughts about not having shared all of the details – really *any* of the details -- with Jim, going all the way back to my annual exam.

As you might have guessed by now, in many ways I am a rather private person and I also like being in control. Because anesthesia was required for each procedure, I realized someone would have to drive me to and from the hospital. So it was time to either tell Jim ... or explain why a taxi was picking me up and returning me home a little groggy on

two consecutive Mondays. That didn't sound like something a husband would easily ignore, and definitely not Jim.

For the next few days, I focused on my speaking engagements, completing my commitments one by one. On the way home from the last scheduled speech, I puzzled over what I was going to say to Jim. How could I explain the scary news and such short notice all at the same time?

“Are you available to drive me to the hospital next Monday so I can have a little fatty tissue removed from my breast? And by the way, the following week, I'll need you again because I'm having a D&C. How's this work with your schedule?”

It's just not that easy writing those kinds of speeches.

I rehearsed over and over again all the way home, even changing the inflection in my voice to see if it would soften the message. When I walked in the house, I found Jim in his favorite glider, relaxing on our screened porch. I joined him and we started talking about really important things like the weather, dinner and our grandchildren, while I tried to find the perfect time to begin.

Finally, in a rather casual voice, I said, “By the way, I found a lump in my right breast and have decided to just go ahead and have it removed. Both my internist and surgeon think it is probably just a little fatty tissue, but they want to check it out to make sure. I'm really not worried about it myself.”

It was obvious Jim was still processing what he had just heard when I started to speak again. By then my voice indicated I might be a little tense and nervous. In the next breath, I said, “Oh yeah, I've also been to see my gynecologist ...”

Before I could say more, he leaned toward me and yelled, “Don't tell me you're pregnant!”

While staring intensely at each other, we both burst out laughing at the ridiculous thought of two 60-year-olds becoming parents all over again! After all, we already had three children and seven grandchildren. With a smile on my face and a new sense of calmness, I was able to

share with him the details of the previous three weeks. His humor was a tremendous help in easing what was once a tense moment.

I assured Jim that I was not worried ... and I really wasn't. Because I didn't panic, he didn't panic. I honestly believe that emotions are contagious. I was grateful that Jim took the cue from me. I'm sure he was concerned, but at least for the next two weeks our lives went on as usual.

Excisional Biopsy

Although we arrived at the hospital on time for my excisional biopsy, my surgery was delayed for several hours due to a prior procedure taking longer than anticipated. When I woke up, Jim told me that the surgeon had removed the small mass and still believed it was nothing more than "a little fatty tissue." It would be sent to pathology for further testing, and I could call the surgeon's office on Thursday to learn the results.

Jim and I headed for home and I slept like a baby through the night. For the next several days I was sore, but it was nothing I couldn't handle. I was soon back to my usual activities and energy level.

Before the biopsy, I had been calm and basically unconcerned. I had never seriously thought I might have cancer. My father was a heavy smoker and had died from lung cancer; I had no other family history of cancer and I'd had negative mammograms for the past fifteen years.

As I was lying in bed planning my day the morning after the biopsy, reality hit. I thought to myself, "You'd better quit putzing around, get your act together, and learn as much as you can, just in case the pathology report reveals you *do* have breast cancer."

I spent literally all day Tuesday and Wednesday glued to the Internet, reading anything and everything I could about breast cancer from diagnosis to treatments such as lumpectomies and mastectomies.