

Hello everyone – my name is Theresa Dering and I am a breast cancer survivor. Breast cancer was stupid enough to pick me. It had no idea how hard I was going to fight back. My story begins 14 months ago – when everything in my life, my whole world, changed.

Before going to bed one evening and quite by accident, I found a dimple on the underside of my left breast. Having had a negative mammogram 4 months earlier and no family history of breast cancer, I wasn't that concerned but I did decide to get to a doctor just to be on the safe side. Little did I know that 70% of all women with breast cancer have no family history. After examining my breasts the doctor said the word “mass” three times in the less than 60 seconds, I knew I was in trouble. I had an ultrasound, I had a biopsy and on August 21, 2007 at precisely 12:37 in the afternoon, I heard the words... Theresa, you have breast cancer and it's stage III. The 14 days following August 21 are hard for me to remember clearly. My husband, Brian, and I moved methodically through a fog. During those days I had countless doctor appointments, I was scanned from the top of my head to the tips of my toes to see if the cancer had traveled, I had a breast MRI, I had a port a cath surgically implanted in my chest and finally, I found myself lying on a bed getting my first chemotherapy treatment while a very caring nurse held my hand and dried my tears. It was all so surreal. During that time I had to absorb so much information and it was so frightening. I quickly learned about survival statistics, treatment plans, surgery options and I learned that I was going to lose my hair and my breasts. As you can imagine, those were some very dark days.

I figured out quite quickly that I was not going to be able to get through this on my own. So I took a deep breath, I gathered my family and friends around me and told them about the plan to make me better. I held on tightly to my husband, the love of my life. I told my staff at work and asked for their support. I shared the news with my colleagues, some of the finest health care professionals in the industry, and asked them to support me. The single most important decision that I made was my decision to live a life wrapped in grace and dignity and happiness in spite of the beast within my breast. Brian and I committed to one another to maintain a sense of humor about ‘our little predicament’. We named the mass fred. It was easier to hate something that had a name. We poked fun at fred. We belittled and denounced fred. We demanded that fred leave us alone. When tests showed that there were actually two masses, we named the second one derf (fred spelled backwards) and continued the barrage of insults and slander. Needless to say, laughter and love has carried us through.

With the encouragement of my husband/now caregiver, I decided to share my story and my journey with those I love and those who love me. I invited everyone to take this journey with me by creating a blog on the internet. While originally intended to keep friends and family informed of my progress, the blog has provided me with a means to document not only the facts about my treatment but also to journal my feelings relative to this whole journey. The blog is titled, “The Journey of the Pink Ribbon”. I have been told

that it helps the readers as much as it helps me. The support that I have gotten as a result of being up front about my cancer has been the wind beneath my wings as I make my way, as I sometimes claw my way through this journey. I have never regretted my decision to be open and up front about my cancer.

I was encouraged by my medical team to live my life as though this cancer is an inconvenience that just needs to be dealt with rather than a death sentence. In an effort to comply with their wishes (I always do as I am told,,,), Brian and I traveled to Aruba, Disney World and the Mexican Riviera since my diagnosis and in between scheduled treatments. We renewed our wedding vows on a beautiful beach at sunset, we have hosted family gatherings and have had a lot of company over to the house. I have worked at my job at SLCH nearly full time since August and I continued to attend classes toward my doctorate – a degree that I hope to complete by this time next year. Life hasn't stopped and it certainly is sweeter.

What I have found along that way is that the American Cancer Society is all around me, popping up in the most unexpected places, helping to support me through these trying times:

- The ACS, through the Look Good Feel Better program, taught me how to moisturize and make up my skin, how to tie a scarf around my head and how to select a wig.
- I turned to the ACS when I need a confidential and private way to purchase mastectomy bras and prosthetic forms. I found a fabulous resource in the ACS's tldirect, a non-profit mail order company that specializes in supporting the female cancer patient.
- I found a wealth of information on the ACS web site about the latest research and treatment options.
- I found a community of survivors out there, brought together in news groups and chat rooms, supported by the ACS.
- I found that if I call the ACS, any time, any day, someone will pick up the phone and ask, "How can I help you? – Literally 24 hours a day, 7 days a week....I know...I have called at 3am...."
- I hope to one day become a "Reach to Recovery" volunteer. "Reach to Recovery" is an ACS program that gives 1 on 1 support and coaching to someone who is newly diagnosed with breast cancer.

As ACS fund raising organizers, participants and supporters please know that the work that you do and the money that you raise through events such this is deeply appreciated. The arms of the ACS are far reaching and get to the core of cancer – treatment and cure. The treatments that I have received were formulated and selected based in part on the results of ACS funded research studies. Your efforts represent the future, you give life and a voice to the cure that is on the horizon.

As for me and my story, I clawed my way through 20 weeks of neoadjuvant chemotherapy. The chemo did its job and the masses melted away until they were no longer detectable. After chemo was finished I had bilateral mastectomies on February 13th of this year. The cancer was only in my left breast but I made the decision to remove both of my breasts – I am determined to never go through this again if I can help it. 21 lymph nodes were removed during the surgery – all were negative and I had wonderfully wide surgical margins. It seems that I did indeed run, Fred and Derf out of town. My hair fell out 13 days after my first chemo infusion and came back – and it is thicker and curlier than ever! I had 34 radiation treatments this past spring and I began the breast reconstruction process with the first of several surgeries 5 weeks ago. I get my last Herceptin treatment on Monday, and I will take Tamoxifen for the next 5 years. As of this day I stand before you a 13 month cancer survivor and I have been cancer free for 8 *glorious* months.

Cancer has made me look at my life differently. It had made me look within. It has made me dig deep into my soul for courage that I did not know that I had. It has inspired me to reach out to others. I feel courageous and strong. I feel victorious. I feel like a warrior. I feel like I stared my cancer down and spit in its eye. I ran, Fred and Derf out of town. I feel like a survivor. Today – everyday - is a GREAT day to be alive.

Thank you for having me here today – every time I tell my story I heal just a bit more. I have been through the fear of diagnosis and the hell of treatment and I feel as though I am finally stepping back into the light of a normal life. It's not my old life, it is a better version of my old life; my priorities are in line, my goals are clear and my resolve to live each day to the fullest is my focus. It is my sincere hope that one day we won't have to gather together for events such as this to raise money to fund research...I hope that one day we will be able to declare a cure and even more importantly, a means of prevention. Until such time, we will continue to gather together to tell our stories – I am sure that mine is not the only story in the room today. We will support one another, we will laugh, we will dream and we will cry...and we will be warriors together in the fight against breast cancer. Thank you!