

## **Ruth Chermok**

### **Breast Cancer Survivor**

At age 46 I was on top of the world. Rick, my high school sweetheart, and I had just celebrated our 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We had just moved our daughter, Valerie, to her first year of law school, and our daughter, Sarah, was starting her second year of college. Life was too good, and we were enjoying our lives as “empty nesters” and taking great joy in watching our daughters’ lives unfold.

After worrying for some time about a very minor physical change in my breast, I decided in September to have my family physician, Dr. Rezaei (and long time friend) “check it out.” She immediately suggested a mammogram, and even though my annual mammogram just six months prior was fine, she had me scheduled for one immediately. Having had several call-backs for dense breast tissue, I was not terribly concerned and was certain it would check out fine.

Following another mammogram and ultrasound which were both inconclusive, I was scheduled to be seen by a very skilled breast surgeon. Almost immediately I could sense his concern and desire to get a surgical biopsy done.

On Friday, October 13 (not a great date, right?) my pathologist became a central figure in the team that would save my life, and restore my health!! Following my surgical procedure, Dr. Rose indicated to Rick that he felt likely it was cancerous, but the pathology report would be critical to my diagnosis and more importantly to “the plan”. After the pathology report was completed, the plan became double mastectomies. One side for prophylactic reasons and the other side due to tumor size. This proved to be the easiest decision to make, due to the fact that mammograms and ultrasounds would obviously not prove to be adequate detection or protection for me.

November 9 was the day that I became a survivor and began the course of treatment to restore my health. Following my surgery, I remember my husband coming in to the room and presenting me with a bottle of champagne to celebrate what appeared to be negative sentinel nodes!! We cried and celebrated, even though Dr. Rose had cautioned us that we couldn’t be sure until the work of my pathologist was complete! Within a few days our celebration was tempered, by the pathology report and the discovery of some minor involvement in a few of the sentinel nodes. Then we faced the difficult decision to go thru another surgery, and complete node dissection to resolve completely how far the cancer had spread and to make other treatment decisions.

Following the third surgery in a little over a month, we held our breath while “my pathologist” (Dr. Gene Herbek) did his work to analyze another 17 lymph nodes. Celebration and more tears when the report came back that they were all negative!!! Now, we could look towards the next phase in the plan.

My skilled team of radiologist, surgeon and pathologist had brought me this far, and I had great confidence that my pathologist had identified the structure of the cells, and given the oncology team the information necessary to create a plan of treatment.

Beginning chemo on December 26 was the next step. A compassionate and skilled team brought me and my concerned family through a course of eight treatments! Dr. Nordquist and the special nursing team, cheered us on and thru every side effect, and managed my care perfectly!

Then, Dr. Duckert and his radiology team took over and with skill and confidence helped me through the course of 28 daily radiation treatments. Although the road ahead had looked so long on October 13 when we started, it was now June and time to enjoy the summer, cherish my family, my health and celebrate my life!

A dear survivor friend of mine once said, "I would never call breast cancer a blessing, but many blessings come from it!" I have to agree! I have been blessed with restored health, an even closer relationship with my dear husband and loving family, and a much clearer perspective on what is important to me and how I want to continue on my journey!

Thus, I'm sitting on my first morning of "semi-retirement" enjoying the view from my desk at our lake cottage. I'm beginning a new journey to work less, spend a lot more time with the ones I love, and doing those things that restore my soul. We recently celebrated the college graduation of our daughter Sarah. A few weeks ago, the journey was complete with the celebration of Val's graduation from law school! Without my amazing and dedicated medical team, and the skill and knowledge of my pathologist that guided so many decisions; I might not have experienced these blessings!

I encourage all women to faithfully get their annual mammograms, perform self checks and to investigate any changes in appearance of their breasts! If they have to join the "sorority of survivors," I pray they experience the skill, care and compassion of a team as great as mine. They have all been incredible blessings in my life!