



Here We Go *AGAIN*

Julie and Cynthia had been through it all before. Shock. Confusion. Fear. They knew the drill, and immediately begin the search for information, a sharp medical team, and new treatment options. They knew they would again travel this journey together, shoulder to shoulder, moving forward, staying positive, and never giving up. They shifted their sense of humor into gear ...

By Maryjo Faith Morgan

Although Julie was over 30 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer the first time, she admits being very naive. "I was in denial when the lump showed up. I wasn't concerned about cancer. I thought I was too young." Cynthia agrees when Julie says at that time women were encouraged to get their first mammogram by age 40. Since her mother had lots of benign lumps, Julie wasn't too concerned when the lump first appeared. "I just was not aware."

They were living in their beloved New Orleans; friends rallied and family traveled in for Julie's mastectomy and chemotherapy. During that round Julie had extreme nausea. Zofran, a prescription drug that greatly alleviates this discomfort, was only available by IV then. (Now it's a pill.) A nurse who saw Julie often noticed how nauseated she was each time. On one particularly difficult day she couldn't stand by, doing nothing in the face of Julie's suffering. "This woman did not hesitate. She simply hooked me up an IV of Zofran. It was the first relief I'd had in ages." Julie will never forget the tremendous physical and emotional benefit of that single kindness.

When Julie's doctor indicated the outlook was bleak, both Julie and Cynthia responded by going deeply into their Buddhist practice, chanting two or three hours a day. That focus made Julie feel connected to a universal power, the whole Buddhist community, and unlimited possibility. Julie persevered through an aggressive chemo schedule, with treatments on Fridays and entire weekends to recuperate. Much to her doctor's surprise, she

improved. "He said I was lucky. We told him about our beliefs, and that it was not luck, it was good fortune and that connectedness. I think we shocked him."

Julie and Cynthia made it through those tough days; the experience was significant. Their bond became stronger and their families clearly saw their total commitment to each other. It was a real turning point.

Careers unfolded and life went on. But something was missing. So they decided to move back to Fort Collins to be near their families once more. For 9 years Julie was cancer free. She never looked back. She laughs, "Denial works pretty well! I didn't worry at all." But her partner Cynthia says the thought never left her mind.

Four years ago this March, Julie developed a cough and began losing weight. The

symptoms were different this time, and a clear diagnosis took more testing than before, but the results were the same. Julie had breast cancer. Again.

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Another mastectomy, more chemo, and extreme exhaustion. Julie took Femara, had brain radiation twice, and surgeries on her heart and right lung to relieve fluid buildup. She instructs, "When breast cancer metastasizes, it is still breast cancer, even if it is in the brain. It is not brain cancer." Dr. Scott confirms that regardless of

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its location in the body, breast cancer is treated as such, and is most commonly found in the bones, liver, lung, brain, or lymphatic system. "We may use radiation if it is in the brain, or take a different approach, depending on where it is, but it is still breast cancer."

Both Julie and Cynthia have the utmost confidence in Dr. Miho Scott and the team at Cancer Center of the Rockies. Julie expresses there is a high quality of care and connection with the staff; "Tina Niebur, Dr. Scott's medical assistant, is always warm and welcoming, doing whatever she can for us."

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—Julie



Tina takes her patient contact to heart, saying the best thing about her job is that she gets to know her patients well. "In a family practice you see patients maybe once a year. Here we see them frequently. We get to know our patients and care about them, like a tight knit family. We can sit down and talk about anything, have entire conversations not at all related to cancer."

Clearly, building relationships is a sound strategy when dealing with cancer. Julie is certain her doctor listens to her, constantly innovating and advocating. "She does not hesitate to get input or refer to another specialist." Cynthia remembers Dr. Scott calling them unexpectedly several times. "One time, Dr. Scott had been thinking about Julie's case, and called us immediately with her idea, even though it was late on a Friday night." No wonder they trust her implicitly.

Dr. Scott says that as a doctor, "You want to do something in medicine to contribute, that you can be a part of the greater good. I know that might sound corny." Indeed, it might have, if not for the commitment evident in her expression. "Oncology is a field that is constantly evolving. In terms of what is available to us, look what we can cure today! Look at Armstrong with stage four testicular cancer. Years ago I talked to a doctor who heard a presentation suggesting cures from metastatic testicular cancer; he said they all just rolled their eyes. Now, I offer these patients cures." She is definite in her purpose, "I want to do what I can to improve the quality of life and the quantity. I want to help people live better. If they can be cured of cancer, to do that. If not, to give them the best we have to offer."

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She says that clinical trials are extremely important. That's how progress is made, although they are not right for everybody. "The trend is toward more point-targeted therapies using your body's own immune system. This approach is smarter, and we are making progress." Most of all, Dr. Scott stresses that it is important to stay positive. "A positive attitude can carry you a long way. You have to be realistic, and sometimes denial is a part of a defense mechanism." She suggests that a patient's emotional progression is somewhat like cooking. "You have to take one step at a time, you can't rush. We cook each dish at a different speed or heat. People are the same way, each at an individual pace. You just have to let go; patients don't have to fit into our time table. It takes balance."

Julie and Cynthia have found their balance in SGI (Soka Gakkai International), a lay Buddhist organization whose members are dedicated to the task of working for a new era based on universal values of human equality and dignity.

Many belief systems include aspects of gathering as a community with a singular purpose, and SGI is no exception. Their group gathers once a week and chants a phrase with specific meaning, "NAM MYOHO RENGE KYO." There is significance in each word: NAM—Devotion of body and mind to the true object of respect; MYOHO—Mystic law of the universe or life itself; RENGE—Simultaneity of causes and effect; and KYO—Universal sound which summarizes all the functions and activities of life.

Both women have found deep meaning in their practice, which provides yet another circle of support locally and at the SGI culture center in Denver. Julie is certain that she is alive because of it. Her word of advice to others in similar health-challenging situations is clear. "Of course, follow the recommended treatment, but don't take your diagnosis as a death sentence. According to Buddhists, it doesn't matter how you die; it matters how you live."

Julie puts great value on how she lives her life each day, and says the one thing survivors have in common is hope. Hers is continually refueled by what they call "Team Julie," an awesome network of family, friends, co-workers, and a medical team. Julie begins, "These people have made our life." And Cynthia finishes, "possible." Julie states emphatically, "I am so,

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so fortunate. So many miracles, being in the right place at the right time."

In tag team style they summarize a long list of miracles. When Julie ran out of sick time at Lutheran Family Services, her co-workers donated their sick time to her. When their medical expenses climbed over \$500 a month, her parents helped them out. When their insurance was running out, innovative friends in New Orleans came up with a generous solution.

Cynthia explains, "This couple had a 25th anniversary coming up. We were here, so couldn't attend. They sent out invitations to their celebration, asking people to send cards and money to help us instead of spending anything on their anniversary!" Julie marvels, "People came out of the woodwork. We got cards, letters, and help to meet insurance and medical costs."

Julie continues on about people's generous support and how it helps her. "The first Avon Walk was from Fort Collins to Boulder. I was weak, very skinny, and had no hair. There was no way." So she slept late the day of the event but was awakened that morning by the sound of the festivities revving up at nearby CSU. Drawn outside, she saw streams of walkers following the route, which ran right by her house. She sat in a lawn chair, cheering them on. "I was so inspired by them, I felt as if they came to me, were walking for me. Even the walkers had tears in their eyes." Avon was doing a video of it, and interviewed Julie. She was overwhelmed by the response from those who saw it.

"The phone kept ringing! Old friends, even strangers called." A friend from her undergrad days years ago phoned to tell her that seeing Julie in the video inspired her to search out the Avon walk near her and participate.

Julie and Cynthia share a tremendous sense of fun, and they make sure they don't lose their sense of humor. Cynthia teases, "You know how doctors' offices send out reminders? When Julie got a postcard to schedule her annual mammogram ..." Julie finishes for her, "You've left me breastless!" Both dissolve into laughter and say that you just can't be too serious. With that attitude, they will go a long way. **S**

Maryjo Faith Morgan is a Loveland freelance writer who is deeply honored to share this couple's story.