

Kristen Vilhauer



Kristin Vilhauer, married with 3 children, (21, 15 & 11), recently turned 42 years old and I am a 9-year breast cancer survivor. 40 is the milestone birthday in a women's life when you have your first mammogram, I had mine at age 32.

It was October 2008 when I had found a painful lump; my regular doctor scheduled me to have my first mammogram & an ultrasound. After not finding anything on the mammogram, I canceled the ultrasound appointment, thinking I did not need the appointment, as the lump was most likely a result of hormones. I went about my life without worry, the next month, the lump was still there, still painful to the touch, so I rescheduled the ultrasound, I was there for quite some time & they said they found what I was feeling but were sure it was nothing. So again, I leave the hospital, thinking for sure it is hormones (as that is what the doctors & techs eluded too) & I did not need to be concerned about it. By the end of the year it was still there, still painful, so I went to see a surgeon that I had seen in the past, thinking for sure he would remove it. He too

told me it was nothing to worry about because cancer does not hurt and I have many other lumps from nursing babies and having children.

Therefore, that was it, 3rd doctor, 3rd opinion, so I let it go and I did not let it burden me.

It was not until March (6 months after I initially found the lump) that a good friend of mine came to me with a business card of a breast cancer specialist in Sioux Falls and suggested I have just one final check. Of course, without wanting to deal with it, I put it off until after my husband and I went on our vacation, as I was not bothered about it. I made the appointment for the first part of April.

The day came, my mom and I headed to Sioux Falls, we were going to go to the appointment and then go wedding shopping. My sister was getting married in a few months, I was a bridesmaid and my 3-year-old daughter was the flower girl. Mom asked me if we should be worried about this appointment, I kind of chuckled and said, "No, I am more worried about finding shoes for Kennedy to match the dress" Of course, mom was on edge.

The doctor came in and asked what I was being seen for; I told her I just wanted a 3rd or maybe 4th opinion, (forgetting which # it actually was).

She went on to tell me her history and that she just does not go around removing lumps for no reason. My thought was, here we go she is going to send me on my way like the rest of them, but after discussion, she said she would do the lumpectomy to get rid of my discomfort I was having. She said there was no hurry as the records were not alarming. So I scheduled the surgery 2 weeks later, no big deal right?

Surgery day came, without worries my husband and I headed to Sioux Falls.

After surgery, the doctor came out, talked to my husband while I was in recovery & told him it was just dense tissue and she would call by Thursday with the results of the testing & was sure the report would be fine. That was a Monday (the Monday before Easter that year), Thursday came & went we heard nothing, Friday I waited until after noon before I called them, they said "well we have the report but they need to redo some of the testing" but they didn't really have much information for me. They told me to try not worry over the weekend. Worry, why worry, I had not up to this point.

Keep in mind, before this moment, never did it cross my mind "what if this lump is cancer" It was not something I was familiar with nor did I worry

about as no one in my close family had had it.

Easter Monday, (I tell myself), if I do not hear from them by noon, I am calling, around lunchtime my phone rings and it is the actual doctor. Within the first couple of minutes, what I heard clearly was "it's Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) cancer, it's 100% curable and you are not going to die" the rest of the conversation is lost from my mind. When I hung up the phone I had scribbled down on a note pad what else I must have heard; my margins were positive therefore she did not get all the cancer, I needed more tests & needed to be in SF the next day to discuss another lumpectomy to remove the rest or have a mastectomy.

I called my husband, stayed at work the rest of the day, in shock and didn't tell anyone and the next day we headed to Sioux Falls. When we left there, we knew exactly what was best for me. We weighed out the pros & cons and decided to have a double mastectomy. I was done having children, I was young & didn't have time to go through all of that again. Having a double mastectomy took my chances of reoccurrence to almost next to nothing and took away any chance I had at having radiation treatments.

DCIS is the most common type of non-invasive breast cancer. Ductal means that the cancer starts inside the milk ducts, carcinoma refers to any cancer that begins in the skin or other tissues (including breast tissue), and in situ means "in its original place." DCIS is "non-invasive" because it hasn't spread beyond the milk duct into any normal surrounding breast tissue. DCIS isn't life-threatening, but having DCIS can increase the risk of developing an invasive breast cancer later on. They told me, if you are going to have breast cancer, this is the best type to have.....Lucky me.

The days to follow were exhausting. How do you tell your middle school child, you have cancer and hope he understands? Telling the story over & over was exhausting and made me anxious, some days I was angry and/or sad with "why me?" and then other days "why not me?". I was young and it was beatable. The doctor told me at the first appointment, it was going to be a 6 month roller coaster and then I'll be back to my normal everyday life. She was exactly right.

We waited until after the wedding and the following week, June 2009 I had a double mastectomy & reconstruction surgery. During surgery, they tested my lymph nodes which all came back clear, therefore it had not spread. I was in the hospital from Thursday to Sunday and after 20+ trips to Sioux Falls, my final touches to my reconstruction surgery was

December of 2009. One of those many trips was to see an oncologist, however since my cancer was caught so early before it spread outside of the milk duct there was no reason for chemotherapy or any kind of treatment.

Not a day goes by that I do not think about it (the scars are there to remind me) and although it has been 9 years, it is still hard to say the "C" word when associating it with myself. Since my cancer journey, I have become an avid runner and am in check with my health & exercise regularly. On my 5 year cancer anniversary I ran my first half marathon (13.1 miles) and on my 10 year anniversary my goal is to run my first full marathon (26.2 miles) I have cancer to thank for that, because I know I would not be in the health I am today had I not been dealt the cancer card.

Because early detection is the key, early detection saved me from treatment. Had I not listened to my body and been persistent my oncologist is sure it would have spread in another few months, and then I would have had to have treatment. I consider myself lucky for the cancer journey I had.