

Mark Vaux



To stand before you today and say that cancer was a blessing for me seems a bit strange to say the least. The fact that I had cancer didn't surprise me; I always thought someday I would. Even today, coming up on my 5th year as a survivor it still seems a bit surreal. However, I never thought I'd be here as a 3x cancer survivor. Maybe that's because I associated having cancer as being sick ... I wasn't sick, I felt great. Or maybe it's because of the type of the first cancer I had and the rarity of male breast cancer. About 250,000 women will be diagnosed annually with breast cancer but only 2,000 guys will be. That's one in every 2 million men. I've beaten cancer three times and if it ever comes back again, I will beat it again. I am the poster child for early detection, and it was that early detection that was the key for winning the battle, an expeditious recovery and allowing me to still be here today. I cannot stress enough the importance of early detection. If something does seem right or feel right, go get it checked ... here's my story.

I've been blessed with great health all my life. I had the usual colds, flu etc. but I was always diligent about getting my annual physicals. We'd had been monitoring a glandular lump in my breast for about a year that gave no indication or cause for concern. In the fall of 2014, my nipple started to crack, peel, bleed and begin to heal but never completed the healing process. After about 3 months it was time to go see my doctor. We treated it for dermatitis, but it got worse.

We made a call to Edith Sanford breast clinic in Fargo, did a mammogram and 2 ultrasounds. The next day, Jan 11, 2015 my doctor called and shared the three words you never want to hear ... you have cancer. I was diagnosed with stage 3B breast cancer and skin cancer. My tumor broke through the skin, causing skin cancer. I thought I was prepared for it, but quickly found out; you never really are prepared to get that kind of news. 2 weeks later I had a full mastectomy followed by 16 rounds of chemo over 20 weeks and 25 radiation treatments. I rang the bell August 28, 2015.

My ah-ha moment came in September of that year, the day Flip Saunders died. Back up to a mid-July day, 2 weeks after my last chemo treatment, it was 95 degrees in Fargo, that rarely happens. I was freezing, I put on the heaviest sweat suit I could find and crawled in bed with 2 comforters. My wife came home a few minutes later and called the oncologist who asked what my temp was ... it was 104. He said go straight to ER, ASAP. I didn't want to go, thinking I'd be fine the next morning, just let me sleep it off. I went to ER, it was PACKED. The receptionist said it would be a wait of 2.5 hours. I said I was going home.

As I turned to leave, I was approached by a nurse who asked if I was Mark. I said yes and she said come with me right now. I had chemo fever. Flip Saunders died from having a chemo fever.

Fast forward to December 2016. Through my annual physical we found a slightly elevated psa test. We did a few more tests over the following weeks and it continued to climb. The numbers weren't high, but they were too high for my age. We did a biopsy in January 2017 and discovered that 70% of my prostate had cancer. We had 2 options radiation or removal. Both options come with life changing consequences. After a lot of thought, conversation and prayer, I had it removed on March 14, 2017 and was cancer free once again as it didn't spread beyond the gland. To beat cancer, you need five things: faith, family, friends, a strong mental attitude and a rock star medical team. You can't be weak in any of those areas.

The mental side of cancer is more difficult than the physical side. It shatters your self-confidence—who you are. Everything is different and everything is measured in before and after. While going through treatments there were things I couldn't do anymore and that was incredibly frustrating. And it takes a long, long time to get back to 100%. In fact, the new 100% is different than the 100% before cancer. There are now things that I can't do or don't do as well as I used to ... could be the maintenance drugs I'm on or it could be getting older. Cancer teaches you patience and perseverance.

To the healthcare providers, thank you for what you do. The compassion you have for your patients is amazing. It takes a truly special person to care for cancer patients. When you walk into the cancer center, the first thing you notice is how many people are there and you know they are either a patient or a caregiver. You also notice immediately that cancer doesn't discriminate. There are elderly people, young children, professional businesspeople and homeless people all with one thing in common.

To the caregivers, you'll never fully understand the importance and what your love and support means to your loved one going through this. I think it's easier to be the patient than it is to be the caregiver.

To the patients and survivors, don't give up don't ever give up. Keep fighting and when you get too tired to fight, let someone else do it for you. You are an inspiration for others going through cancer. I drew my inspiration from a 7 year little boy who while going through treatments looked at his dad and told him everything was going to be ok. He passed away a few weeks later. Look, I get you might want to bury this part of your life and sometimes I do to. But it's part of who we are and remember how you felt when you first got the news, how scared you were. Be there for others who are going through it, you can provide comfort and understanding to them that others can't.

I opened by telling you I feel blessed to have gone through this. That's probably because I'm still here today and cancer free; because I met a lot of amazing people, learned a lot about life, even more about myself. I'm honored to be able to share my story and help others as they face their battles with cancer. The 2 most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you figure out why. As I was going through treatments, I asked God why a lot. Not from a self-pity standpoint but because I wanted to find a way to turn this into a positive and have something good come from it. Only time will tell but maybe this is why I was

born.