



Stories of

hope

One lucky person

I was diagnosed with Breast Cancer in 2001 at 31 years old. I have no history of cancer on either parent's side, and I had two small children (8 and 10). I had a mastectomy in April of 2001, a few days after my birthday. Luckily, it was contained so there was no need for chemo or radiation. It has been 21 years, and there has been no reoccurrence. I am one lucky person.

— *Former Patient*

Grateful

I've been told that my emergency appendectomy in March 2021 was as fortuitous a procedure as a patient could hope for. It was during an abdominal CT scan to confirm the condition of my appendix that a lump on my kidney was discovered. The appendectomy was performed uneventfully, and I was referred to Dr. Dennis LaRock for removal of the tumor. Again, how fortunate I was to be matched with one of the best surgeons in our region. In the face of anxiety and uncertainty surrounding my condition and prognosis, there was no better healthcare partner to have in my corner than Dr. LaRock. My surgery was completed with excellent results, and we are now in the midst of periodic monitoring.

Each day now begins with an enhanced level of appreciation, and I take nothing for granted. In accepting there are no guarantees for any of us, I try to put stock in a quote I stumbled across shortly after my surgery. ***Fear does not stop death. It stops life. And worrying does not take away tomorrow's troubles. It takes away today's peace.***

— *Patient*

Just be there

I'm a Respiratory Therapist. One quiet morning, around 7:15, I was heading to get coffee and passed a woman walking near the gift shop in the hospital.

In the 10/5/1 tradition, I said, "Good morning, how are you?" she said "OK" in a way that I knew things were "not OK." I had a half a second to think about how to proceed then stopped and said, "Is everything all right? Would you like to talk?" She said she had spent the night with her daughter who was not doing well, fighting breast cancer. We had a several-minute conversation about the situation, which left us both in tears. We ended our conversation with her saying "I'm so glad I ran into you today." I said the same. Together we walked into the lobby, me to get my coffee and her, I assume, home to continue her day.

What this left me with, besides the lump in my throat even all these years later, is despite not knowing this woman, just be there. Just offer whatever genuine support you can and you'll find it will often be a priceless experience. Priceless for the person who receives it and priceless for you, for giving it.

— *Anonymous*

Meet it Head-On

When I was a child, one scarcely dared speak the word "cancer" aloud. Even physicians and nurses whispered to family members: "He has C-A". Cancer inspired fear and fatalism. So, when I was diagnosed with cancer in the midst of caring for my wife in her final illness from another disease, I wondered which of us would die first, and who would care for her if I predeceased her? I had surgery followed by five months of chemo, taken as a pill and not by IV with few side effects. The treatment took care of the cancer.

Years later, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Two months of carefully targeted radiation left me a little tired but otherwise symptom free. My recent five-year checkup shows me cancer free with very little likelihood of a recurrence. **Message: cancer is a treatable disease if you meet it head-on with honesty and optimism.**

— *Patient*

Looking back

We thought it was allergies, so I drove my 21-year-old daughter to a walk-in urgent care. Due to COVID restrictions, I sat in the car. When she came out, she said they wanted to call an ambulance for her, as they thought my healthy young daughter was having a heart attack. We thought they were nuts and drove to the emergency room instead.

After some time at the ER, a doctor told us the good news was that her heart was fine, but the bad news was she had cancer.

With no cancer on either side of the family, we were in shock and could not believe it. Our life took a swerve, and my daughter was being treated for advanced Lymphoma. For seven months I drove her to her appointments.

Our days were lived on eggshells. Her beautiful long hair soon was shaved; her smooth complexion became blotchy. Her happy outlook on the world was replaced by a dark and scary place.

I'd stay awake to watch her sleep. The clouds slowly parted, and she wandered out of that dark cloud and back into the light, filled with hope and possibilities. Watching her struggle was horrific, but I am thankful it is now behind us.

Being a caregiver of a young cancer patient, as well as elderly parents, is not for the faint of heart. Everyone's needs come before your own. Everyone said to take time for myself but juggling caregiver responsibilities and work was crazy!

Looking back, it feels like a blur from someone else's nightmare. **Today's medical advances allowed my daughter to receive the best treatment and to be in total remission today.** Are my sleepless nights behind me? I doubt it, but for now I just thank the Creator for the strength to see the beauty of each and every day!

— Family Caregiver

Support

I am a three-time breast cancer survivor. I was diagnosed the first time in 2010. When I heard the diagnosis from my doctor, I was devastated, and told my children I was not going to participate in Christmas and New Year's celebrations. I had a lumpectomy in 2011, followed by 32 radiation treatments. I drove to Fall River every morning as the facility in Fairhaven was still being built.

I felt well during the treatments and went from the hospital right to my volunteer job at school every morning. My daughters were very encouraging, and I joined a support group, which helped me a lot! I went on with my life, seeing friends, my family, volunteering at school and going to the gym. I refused to take medication. I had read so much about the side effects that I thought I could do without it.

Seven years later a mammogram showed a new tumor in the same breast. Again, I had a lumpectomy followed by 32 radiation treatments. This time two a day, at 9 AM and 3 PM. Again, the treatment went well, and I was feeling great. I still refused to take medication.

The next diagnosis came after a PET Scan in 2020, which had been ordered for a totally different problem. A bright spot on the left side of my pelvis showed up in this scan. My doctor explained that it may be nothing, but I had a biopsy and we found that my breast cancer had metathesized into my pelvic bone. I had one radiation treatment.

My most recent scan has turned up the same results as 2020. I am still attending the support group and am now on medication. Unfortunately, I have severe side effects, which are treated with more medication. I still lead a full life. I go to yoga, see my children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, go out to the theater and with friends to dinner or lunch.

Except for the first few days of the first diagnosis, I have been upbeat and happy and try to live my life to the fullest. I think it is important to be upbeat, keep on living your life as always. ***I have a good support group at home and at the Cancer Center. It all helped me a lot.***

— Patient

Five Stars!

I am 78 years old and was diagnosed with endometrial cancer after following up with my doctor regarding unusual spotting for a few days.

In early 2022, I had a complete laparoscopic hysterectomy. ***My advice is DON'T WAIT on screenings or when you have symptoms!***

My cancer was stage one and contained. No chemo or radiation was needed. Having cancer makes you appreciate life and the love of family and friends deeper. I feel I have a second chance at life. How beautiful is that! I give life five stars!

— *Patient*

You are never alone

This is my journey. I work in the ER as a HUC with wonderful co-workers. I was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer in 2021. Imagine my anxiety, panic and sadness with this diagnosis. My life just changed forever. I just kept thinking of my family and their worry. I had bilateral mastectomies in May followed by chemo and radiation. It was a scary experience to say the least. I took time off for my surgery and to recuperate but soon returned to my normal work life.

I thank my family and husband for helping me in this journey. It has not been easy at all. My co-workers were amazing by helping me cope before my leave. I am still going through infusions at the Southcoast Cancer Center in Fall River. The staff are wonderful and caring people.

Your life changes, but it does get better, if that's believable. ***My hope is great, and I think of every day as a gift. You are never alone in this, and I can vouch for that.*** Thank you for this opportunity to share and appreciate my life.

— *Patient*

Be thankful

It is a privilege to work in this setting, to use whatever strengths I have to help others go through the cancer journey. As difficult as the days are sometimes, I am always grateful that I'm on the other side of the IV. But when I felt a lump in my own breast, my world as I knew it was forever changed. That first week was a whirlwind – tests, biopsies, serious conversations with professionals and family. I wanted to tell no one, and I wanted to tell everyone I knew. I wanted to run from this place and never return. And I wanted to start treatment tomorrow.

I decided to start an email conversation to friends and family about my journey. It would highlight what I was going through, how I was feeling, and how I was dealing with it. Those emails would help me to focus on what gave me strength: my God, my loved ones, my responses that helped me get through difficult circumstances in the past.

We all expect the diagnosis to hit someone else, but cancer has no favorites. In our minds, we put cancer at the top of our death sentence list, when in reality, tomorrow is guaranteed to no one. We worry about what may never happen and thus rob ourselves of the peace we could have today.

My advice? ***Be thankful – for everything, even this trial.*** Let nothing go to waste. Let it be used for the good, to change your outlook on life, your treatment of others, your relationship with God. It will benefit not only you, but those who know you.

— *Provider and Patient*

The will to fight

Hi! I am an 18-year survivor of breast cancer! I am grateful every day! I had a wonderful doctors that saved my life! I had two different cancers in one breast – inflammatory and ductal. I received chemo and had the breast removed, which saved me, thankfully! You can survive breast cancer with great doctors and the will to fight! I am so glad I did!

— *Patient*

Life is good

In 1995, I was diagnosed with stage two breast cancer, I cried all the way home. I went into denial. It only became real with surgery. When I started Radiation, I cried again.

The hope and support I received from the doctors, nurses and my family helped me heal. I met new friends through the support programs at the hospital.

In 2013, I was again diagnosed with a different, more aggressive breast cancer. Found out I had the BRACA gene. Survived many surgeries, radiation, and chemotherapy.

I am now 78, healthy and still going strong, I watched my grandchildren grow up, traveled to Europe and now winter in Florida. I'm thankful for the doctors, nurses, family and faith of strangers who offered their prayers. Oh, and I'm still friends with many of my fellow cancer survivors. Life is good.

— *Patient*

Always think positive

Recently, I was told I have stage four lung cancer. I feel strong as a horse and don't feel like I have cancer. I just turned 62, but I plan on living to be a hundred, at least! I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to prove all these doctors wrong. That's the attitude you have to have when you're dealing with cancer. Don't cry and don't be sad! Be strong! Say to yourself, "I'm going to live. I'm going to live for many years!" Man, I have many years ahead of me! That's the attitude to have. ***Always think positive.***

— *Patient*

Stay Active

I was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma (MM) in 1998 at the age of 59. I had been living well with mild symptoms of MS since I was 27. I was very physically active – tennis, swimming, biking, etc. Suddenly, I was having back surgery to repair a cracked vertebra and scared to move more than a shuffling foot at a time. I spent several weeks in a torso cast. I thought my life, as I knew it, was over.

However, my doctor and my wife convinced me to undergo an autologous stem cell transplant that would push me into remission – and it did. It was a grueling process, but for several years I was free of any myelomalacia and gradually resumed all of my previous activities. When the effects of the transplant waned, I started on a series of meds, and three years ago, I enrolled in a clinical trial that is working really well.

I am now 73 and living a good life. Do I complain about the numbers of medical appointments on my calendar? Yes, I do. Do I bike as fast, walk as quickly and take stairs without using the handrail? Not anymore. But I have added cancer treatments to my present life so I can keep as much of my past life as possible. **My advice to anyone facing a cancer diagnosis is to get good medical advice and try to continue with as many healthy aspects of your pre cancer life as possible.** New cancer treatments are being developed every day. We need to stay as healthy as we can to take advantage of them!

— Patient

Hope for Two

Without hope, I don't know where we would be right now. My daughter was diagnosed with Metastatic Breast Cancer and pregnant at the same time. Against all odds, my daughter was able to receive chemo and protect the unborn baby. Fast forward a year later, we just celebrated our perfectly healthy miracle baby's first birthday. Mom continues with her cancer treatment and is still very active! I don't know what we would have done without this amazing team of medical professionals and of course Hope, love, faith and so many prayers. **Every day there are challenges, sometimes hope changes but it sure gets you through the rough spots.**

— Family Caregiver

Trust

My journey started with a diagnosis of a cancerous cyst attached to my pancreas. This led to the removal of most of my pancreas, my duodenum, gall bladder, and part of my intestines. That was 20 years ago, and I'm still here.

More recently, I was diagnosed with hepatocellular carcinoma (liver cancer). That was two years ago, and I'm still here.

I believe the reason is the support from my wife and the tremendous advances being made in medicine. ***The innovations in technology and the wonderful care I have received contributed to my still being here.*** The other important factor is that I never gave up and put my trust as well as my life in the hands of my medical providers. If you find yourself in a similar situation, stay strong and don't give up. You can beat it, too.

— Patient

Somebody to lean on

I was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma in 2018. ***The Southcoast Health Cancer Center in Fall River saved my life.*** I have been cancer free for 3 years and 7.5 months. I had a wonderful chemotherapy nurse. She knew her job inside and out, and always knew the right things to say to me. She was very easy to talk to, and made the day go by much quicker. I also met two other patients who had gone through chemo and one I am still friends with to date. Having a friend who had the same diagnosis as me and had gone through treatment a little ahead of me, meant the world to me. I always had someone to lean on who knew their stuff.

— Patient

Together

The phone call came at an odd hour at night, after supper dishes were done. I saw on the caller ID ... it was the name of the medical center. I knew right away it was not good. My heart began to pound picking up the phone. The doctor's kindness in how he delivered the diagnosis made all the difference in how we felt about facing a new and unexpected situation together.

I say together, for it includes the doctor who saved my husband's life by encouraging, then insisting, he get his PSA test. That led to a biopsy, nine weeks of radiation and taking a drug as an adjunct treatment that altered his body. That altering extended to making dedicated, mindful shifts in our marriage. We had to adjust to having to sleep in different beds due to his being up at night and wanting me to have my own much needed rest. All those small changes helped us both thrive in compassionate coupling of being in recovery together, not just in the disease. We focused our thinking about the good fortune to have insurance, treatment options, talented medical staff that worked in unison to prolong my husband's life, worth all the side effects and confusion of not knowing if and how long it would work.

Four years later, four seasons of growth and change, we continue in gratitude to thrive, to make the most of each day, the gift we have been given of more time.

— *Family Caregiver*

I can survive this

I was recently diagnosed with prostate cancer, and there is only one way I can look at it. In 1992, I had a massive heart attack and died. I had a great doctor who brought me back to life. Based on that, the only way to look at this current situation is, this is really nothing. That's the ONLY way I can look at it, in a positive way. ***If I can survive death, I can survive this.***

— *Patient*

Words of hope

At the beginning of 2020 – as most were still celebrating the New Year – I was told I had breast cancer. Naturally, my mind gravitated to the worst outcome just hearing those words. It was very frightening. From that day on my husband and I decided not to tell our family, including our three children, until I knew exactly what my future was to be.

We prayed every day, not for a miracle but for strength and courage. I met with my care team, which was overwhelming alone, but with the compassion, honesty, and complete professionalism of those caring for me, my stress level decreased.

I celebrated my 60th birthday preparing for surgery. I could have felt sorry for myself, but I decided to be grateful that I had a chance to beat this. I kept my head up. My care team reminded me to keep it up when I wanted to drag myself down.

My recovery after surgery was easier than expected due to the loving, caring people who surrounded me, and how I decided to approach the new life I faced now. Everyone at the Southcoast Cancer Center and Southcoast Breast Center were amazing every time I saw them ... and I saw them a lot.

I am back to the life I know and love, and most people forget that I am a cancer patient. I keep in touch with some of the other patients from the Cancer Center and we help each other with our stories. ***The words of hope, strength, and courage are not just words ... they are a way of living.***

— *Patient*

We will be here

We have treated many patients on our unit with repeated cycles of chemo. We get to know our patients, and their families, so well. Sometimes patients are admitted every three weeks for a cycle of chemo, and that reoccurs for nearly a year. We work hand in hand with outpatient Oncology.

To the patients directly: We will be there with you. We will answer all of your questions and help alleviate your anxieties. We will go to the Southcoast Cancer Center and be there with you when you “Ring the Bell.” Ringing the bell signifies you are done with your treatment. We will be there for you when you first start treatment, and we will be there for you when you finish your treatment. Your success and happiness is ours too. So many of our patients come back to see us. So many.

That is why we do what we do. When you come back to see us because we had an impact on your life, please know that you had a HUGE impact on our lives. This is why we are Oncology nurses. You will call us months after your treatment is over. We will answer. ***We will be here. You are not alone.***

— *Provider*

Strong

I was diagnosed in 2001 at age 30 with stage 2B breast cancer. My first child was 8 months old at that time. After a double mastectomy, six months of chemotherapy and 36 rounds of radiation (the radiologists walked my son in his stroller around the suite) I am thankfully 22 years without evidence of disease.

I went on to have two more children. I didn't want my cancer to decide the trajectory of my life. ***My advice is more of a truth: you never know how strong you are until you need to be.***

— *Former Patient*

You've got this

I was diagnosed with Stage 1A left breast cancer/invasive lobular carcinoma during the late summer of 2022. When I got the call with the diagnosis, I felt broken and full of fear. I got nervous and was not sure where to turn. I started my journey with treatment at Southcoast. I was fortunate to have support, family members, church peers and community resources. I was also motivated by seeing a very dedicated surgeon. She never gave up on me and was very persistent in making sure I was aware of all my options.

I started reaching out and allowing others to help me. Faith, persistence and learning to be my best advocate were key in my process. Educating myself gave me power to stay focused. After learning more about the risks of invasive cancer, I had to make a difficult decision to have a Bilateral Mastectomy. That was challenging for me, but I was able to overcome the surgery without Chemo or radiation. Here I am today – free of cancer and happy to be around my loved ones.

It was a tough fight, but I can say everything is possible when you believe in yourself and have a strong faith. I learned to never give up and to see every day as a new opportunity to continue fighting. To those that are now fighting cancer in any way I send a prayer, positive thoughts to you and loves ones. **Remember to never give up on yourself. You've got this.** Loving yourself during brokenness is a creative way to put life back together.

— Patient

Never give up hope

I am writing today to share my journey with you.

At age 49, I went for my first colonoscopy. Piece of cake (so I thought). The doctor told me he found a mass that needed to be removed. I had no symptoms whatsoever. A month later, a foot of my colon was removed, but there was some cancer in my lymph nodes. I was informed it was stage three. Six months of chemotherapy left me tired and without much appetite. I did work when I felt that I could. I had a wonderful team of kind RNs and oncologist. They were always truthful and treated me with respect and care. I made it through with their care and with love and support from family and friends.

Today, I am 67 and am so grateful and blessed to have pulled through. I was given the chance to see my children get married and enjoy my 5 grandchildren. It was one day at a time, one treatment at a time. ***Never give up hope. You are so much stronger than you know!***

— Patient

Matter of perspective

"You have cancer." I'll remember those words for as long as I live. It was found incidentally, you know. I asked the ED physician to do a chest CT to rule out a pulmonary embolism. Instead, he came back to tell me I had renal carcinoma.

I had surgery. It really messed me up psychologically. I felt alone, lonely, scared, lost. I pulled out of it though with the help of close friends and family.

It's all a matter of perspective. Is the glass half empty or half full? No. You have the wrong container. It's easily said and hard to do. But anything worthwhile is hard.

Now cancer is less fear and more disbelief. Did I really have that? I have a scar on my abdomen that reminds me. And I realize that cancer can come back. But now I know what it means to live one day at a time and to find the enjoyment in little things.

— Patient

11 years later

The day that Dr. John Lentini (Radiologist) and Dr. Dennis LaRock (Urologist) told me that I had kidney cancer felt like everything just stopped. The paralyzing fear that is felt when you hear the word “cancer” cannot be put into words. The following weeks of tests and pre-op visits were a blur and while I was trying to comprehend this diagnosis, I was also aware of the impact this had on my husband and my mom and dad. The support that was received from Dr. LaRock and Dr. Lentini as well as Dr. Peter Martelly (Associate Chief Medical Officer) at the time, I will never be able to repay. I was devastated and paralyzed by the fear of this diagnosis. However, when I needed to speak to Dr. LaRock, Dr. Lentini or Dr. Martelly, they were right there for me, day or night. Paralyzed by this fear, I often asked the same questions over and over and over again, they stood right by my side, returning every call and every text. When the day of the surgery finally came, it was two days before Christmas. Dr. LaRock was scheduled to go on vacation, but he postponed his vacation a few days to perform the surgery.

My surgery turned out to be a surgical cure. However, the fear that I was still not cured continued to paralyze me and I continued to call and text Dr. LaRock, Dr. Lentini and Dr. Martelly, as I still had so many questions. They stood by my side and continue to do so. I was diagnosed with kidney cancer 11 years ago. Dr. LaRock and Dr. Martelly stayed with me after surgery and told me that I would be fine and that we would still be talking about this 10+ years to come. I did not believe them at the time.

Here we are 11 years later, and I am doing wonderful. ***My heartfelt advice to anyone facing this diagnosis is to believe in your care team and trust what they are telling you.*** Let them help to ease your fears. Reach out to them when needed and talk to them about what you are feeling and how they can help.

I am truly fortunate as I work with my care team as a Southcoast Health employee. This organization saved my life. Southcoast Health is an amazing healthcare organization, and they will stand by you every step of the way. We truly care about our communities and patients, and we are here for you at the time that you need us most.

— *Patient*

There aren't enough words

At 50 years old, it was the most terrifying day of my life. I was told, "You have breast cancer."

The day I learned that I was going to need very strong chemotherapy to fight my tiny little tumor was a whole new level of fear. Cancer and surgery were scary enough, but to hear the word chemotherapy and have images of cancer patients, like you see in bad movies, running through my head, was just too much. I was shaking uncontrollably with tears running down my face as I was given the tour of the infusion room at the Fall River center. I could not even believe that I would have to sit in one of these chairs.

One of the first faces I saw came right over to me, gave me a huge hug, told me they would take good care of me and that it would be OK. I didn't believe her at the time, but it turned out to be so much more than that. I wish I could tell that scared person that what you have in your head is way worse than reality. ***You ARE strong enough to get through this.***

That amazing person who gave me that hug was my nurse Cindy – my angel on earth. Not only did she take amazing care of me from my first hours undergoing chemo to the very end, but she helped me with every little side effect, and I looked forward to my long days in the infusion room. I could not believe that not only was I surviving chemotherapy, but it became my time. With all the help from everyone at the Cancer Center, I kicked butt.

Infusion days became days of relaxing with a ham sandwich, a chocolate pudding saved for me by Judy – a wonderful volunteer – and catching up on the week with Cindy. While chemotherapy certainly isn't fun, and I hope to never have to go through it again, the care I received from Southcoast from the day I was diagnosed, to my first (and all) meetings with my amazing doctors (Dr. Chung, Dr. Shparber and Dr. Kumar), and to every fabulous nurse and secretary, made me believe in angels.

When you have people on your side, helping you fight this battle – and it is certainly a battle – that are as wonderful, caring, and helpful as everyone I met during my treatment, it gives you so much hope that you really will be OK. When you battle cancer, you walk into it with an army behind you. With my Southcoast army behind me, I felt stronger than I've ever felt in my life and have all of those amazing people to thank. There really aren't enough words to thank people for saving your life.

— *Former Patient*