

SHARON'S STORY

Wow!!! This has been an amazing journey. Twenty-Three years have passed and my life has been such a blessing. I was diagnosed with Leiomyosarcoma cancer in May, 1989, at the age of 37. My mother also had LMS and was diagnosed when she was 46 and died at 53. After my mother's death, I was the tender age of 26 and decided to make sure I would never have the cancer she had so I started eating healthy and exercising and going to the gynecologist every 6 months.

My gynecologist kept saying that I would never have the same cancer my mother had because it is very rare and not hereditary. But, at the age of 37, my doctor said there was a fibroid tumor that was growing quickly and we needed to get it out. I had surgery in two weeks and had a complete hysterectomy, as my mother had years before, and the diagnosis was Leiomyosarcoma.

I was preparing for my 20th high school reunion, but all of a sudden, my life took a different route. When it was time to go to the reunion, I was 20 pounds lighter and had a new definition of a "bad hair day"!!! My future became very uncertain and I remember thinking it was a bad dream and I would wake up in the morning and it would be all better. Of course, it didn't take long to realize it was reality-----so the journey began.

I was assigned to a local oncologist and he suggested I go to MD Anderson for a second opinion and ironically enough, his son, who was a physician also, had been diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma and he had already been reading a lot about sarcomas in general because he had only seen maybe three in his practice. He suggested I go to MD Anderson because they are on the cutting edge of research and may have something for me.

I met with Dr. Spitzer, who was the head of the bone marrow transplantation department and it was decided that I would become the first person at MD Anderson to have a bone marrow transplant and stem cell transplant for Sarcoma cancer. My protocol was to have all the preliminary work done, including harvesting bone marrow and stem cells that summer and have one treatment before I left and have four treatments at home with Adriamycin and Cytosan and then back out to Houston for two bone marrow and stem cell transplants. The transplant was called autologous because I used my own cells instead of a donor. I had the transplants back to back and was in the hospital each time around 40 days. The process took approximately 10 months and involved living in Houston for a month while preparing for the transplants. As Dr. Spitzer put it, we will take you to the brink of death and bring you back. The transplants allowed them to give me high doses of chemo and then give my good cells back to me.

I believe in being one's own advocate, and I was reading everything I could get my hands on about LMS and also at the same time searching for spiritual guidance.

It didn't take long to figure out if I would put God first; everything else would fall into place. So, instead of knowing God in my head, I began to believe in my heart that God is very real. My life was transformed at that point and I realized that through Faith, there is Hope!! In Hebrews 11:1, Paul says, "Now, Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." HOPE keeps me living each day to the fullest, regardless of tomorrow and HOPE is the assurance that I will live in eternity with Jesus Christ. LIFE IS NOT A RACE, but a journey to be savored each step of the way and with HOPE as my anchor each day I wake up, I remind myself of the ultimate destination and when we know where we are going, God will help us find the WAY.

Some of the ways I try to help instill hope in others is my leading a support group at Porterfield United Methodist Church where I am able to bring in inspirational speakers and ministers to keep us grounded in the Lord, as well as educational speakers so the members will be more equipped to be an advocate for themselves by getting involved with their health care team. We also visit newly diagnosed cancer patients and send them cards with inspiring messages of HOPE in our Lord.

I had ten years completely cancer free and thought I was healed and cured, but in 1999, I was confronted with the news I had a recurrence. I had surgery for one tumor that was deep in my pelvis and got clear margins. I was introduced to my wonderful Surgical Oncologist, Raphael Pollock at MD Anderson, at that time and he thought it would be best to just watch and wait and have CT scans every three-four months. Dr. Pollock has been by my side for the last

13 years and I have the utmost respect for him. He cares about his patients and he is doing everything in his power to help us get a better handle on Sarcoma.

Over the last 13 years, I have had 9 surgeries and because the numbers of tumors were getting more and more, Dr. Pollock recommended Dr. Patel, Medical Oncologist at MD Anderson. So, in January of 2012, I started Gemsar/Taxotere and after 3 cycles and a CT, it was not working. At that time, we decided to try Adriamycin, Ifosfamide and Mesna (AIM) to see if it would work. After two cycles, it was showing some promise and two more cycles more promise, so I am still on it and will finish my last cycle three weeks before the event!!! Celebration!! I have learned how important it is to choose a hospital with a good Sarcoma Department and that sees at least 100 patients a year. MD Anderson is definitely at the top in ratings for Sarcoma.

I read with interest of a mother that raised funds and gave them directly to a researcher because her son had a rare disease and that researcher found a cure for her little one!! At that point, it became a dream of mine and my daughter Tina; to one day have a fund raiser to get that money directly to research. I mentioned it to Dr. Pollock and he told me of the research lab that his wife, Dr. Lev, was in charge of and ever since then, we have been working towards that goal.

Wonderful friends would want to give donations in my name and I would refer them directly to the Research Lab for LMS at MD Anderson. We have great friends that have donated generously over the years, but this year, Tina, said Mom, "Let's Just Do It" and Polo in the Pines was born in conjunction with Cruisin' for a Cause. I am so excited that we finally did it and it is becoming a reality, not to mention I am so proud of my Daughter for loving me enough to do this.

Life is about choices and I chose to turn this negative into something very positive. It is an opportunity for growth. Growth is not always about getting what we want, but it is about being conformed to the image of Christ in which we become the MEN and WOMEN we have potential to be --- loving, pure, honest and holy.

Even though this is the journey I have had to take, it has not been alone. I have had the love and support of my wonderful husband, Collins, and my daughter, Tina and husband Matt, who is a cancer survivor himself, and also my daughter, Cathie and husband, Chad. We are also blessed with three wonderful granddaughters, Morgan, Collins and Carson. My family inspires me each and every day to keep fighting!!! I also have wonderful friends that have supported me and even strangers who have put me on many, many prayer lists. I also have had the support of so many beautiful, caring nurses. They are such treasures and I will never forget them. I have just made so many special bonds with people since my diagnosis and it has given me so much JOY to help people. Cancer can definitely be a positive thing in our life if we will just let it.

I would like to extend a HUGE "THANK YOU" for your consideration in helping us raise funds that will go directly to the Dr. Lev's Research Team at MD Anderson so we can make an impact towards better treatment and maybe even a cure for Leiomyosarcoma Cancer. My family will be so indebted to all you wonderful people forever!!