

# My Cancer Story

My name is Candace. I am 68 years old, retired, married, mom to three grown children and grandma Candy to five.

I used to say that my life changed forever in February 2002. But actually, everything really started to change **15 years earlier** in the Spring of 1987 when my sister was diagnosed with breast cancer.

She was only 38 years old and we didn't see it coming. We were unaware of any other family members that had had cancer.

My sister died from breast cancer right before her 41st birthday. My other sisters and I realized that there was a real strong possibility that one, two or maybe all three of us could also get breast cancer. We were militant when it came to our annual GYN exams and mammograms.

On Tuesday, February 7, 2002. I went in for my annual GYN exam and to get that all important requisition for my mammogram.

I was also having symptoms of what I thought were the beginning stages of menopause. I was having irregular periods and I felt bloated. I was also having a lot of heartburn. I was 51 years old and I thought it was time for the menopause talk.

When the doctor was performing the exam, all of a sudden, she stopped and said, "We have a problem." She could feel what appeared to be two different masses in my pelvic area. Before I could sit up, she was on the phone scheduling an ultrasound followed by an urgent request for an appointment with a GYN oncologist and then scheduled a CT scan. I remember thinking, "I know where this is all headed but I'm confused, I am supposed to get breast cancer, not ovarian cancer." I didn't have all the symptoms like pelvic pain, going to the bathroom a lot and I didn't have any problem eating.

A couple days later, I came up for air and I was in pre-surgery testing and was introduced to the CA125 blood test. That day it turned out to be 144, which was out of the normal range and I learned supported the potential for an ovarian cancer diagnosis.

My surgery was performed on February 14, 2002. That day, I had a variety of "ectomies." I had a hysterectomy, oophorectomy (removal of ovaries), lymphadectomy (removal of 43 lymph nodes), omentectomy (removal of part of pelvic wall) and an appendectomy. I had two tumors removed. One was still encapsulated and the other had attached itself to the pelvic wall. I was diagnosed with Stage II B (poorly differential papillary serous adeno carcinoma) ovarian cancer. All 43 lymph nodes that had been removed were negative.

My surgery was followed by six rounds of chemotherapy. I lost my hair which didn't take long to adjust to, and I tolerated the chemotherapy drugs better than I thought.

I was pretty strong and thought I was in good shape when I was first diagnosed, so I think this helped. I was also fortunate to have worked at the hospital where I was treated, so I was surrounded by an extremely strong and supportive group of friends and co-workers.

In 2003, I learned about the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genetic predisposition for breast and ovarian cancers. I decided to be genetically tested. BINGO, I tested positive for BRCA1. What this meant was that I was at 55-65% risk for ovarian cancer and 85-95% risk for breast cancer. Because of the high risk for breast cancer, I decided to have a prophylactic bilateral mastectomy in February 2003. It reduced my risk rate down to 10%.

Knowing that I was now BRCA1 positive and that my children had a 50% chance of inheriting it, they opt to be tested. Once again - BINGO! My son, two daughters and a granddaughter tested positive for BRCA1.

I remained in clinical remission for the next four years. I was seeing my GYN oncologist and getting CA125 blood tests every three months and CT scans and chest x-rays every six months. My CA125 was normal until October 2006, when it began to elevate. A CT scan found a suspicious lymph node, nodule and small density in the lower right quadrant of my abdomen. Recurrent ovarian cancer was confirmed. I was put on a very comprehensive chemotherapy regiment which lasted from late October 2006 to March 2008. This time my chemotherapy was more challenging.

In January 2010, my CA125 once again began to elevate. A PET scan revealed suspicious lymph nodes in the right groin region, left arm pit and

left neck. After a needle biopsy confirmed positive, I was once again headed to the chemo clinic for what turned out to be 16 treatments and yes, I lost my hair for the third time. The chemotherapy proved effective on the lymph nodes in the groin and left arm pit but not the neck. I was sent to radiation for 30 treatments.

I was getting PET scans pretty regularly after that when in March of 2013 another lymph node in my neck showed up positive... 25 more radiation treatments. After I finished that series of radiation, I decided to retire. My husband and I decided to take a road trip out to LA to visit our youngest daughter. During the trip, I noticed a pinched and pulling feeling in my left breast. I thought it had something to do with the scar tissue that had formed from all the radiation treatments and surgeries and the reconstructive tissue from my mastectomy.

Upon my return, I checked in with my plastic surgeon and he ordered an ultrasound which was followed by a biopsy. Much to my surprise, and the surprise of my doctors, I was diagnosed with Stage 3B (ductile carcinoma) breast cancer. I had a lumpectomy in September of 2013 followed by 30 radiation treatments.

In early 2016, I began feeling pain in my back and it became difficult to turn my head in either direction. I went in for a bone scan and a MRI, and sure enough, I had two lesions on my C6 vertebrae. It hadn't spread anywhere else, so after five heavy dose radiation treatments, a CT scan indicated I was good to go.

A year later, in January 2017, I was admitted into the hospital for what they called lysis adhesions. Scar tissue had wrapped itself around my intestine and the doctors ended up removing 13 inches.

In January of this year, I went in for another PET scan and once again metastatic breast cancer showed up, this time in my C7 vertebrae. I have been put on a variety of oral chemotherapy drugs. Unfortunately, because my immune system is so compromised, it's hard for me to tolerate any of these drugs for any length of time.

My last PET scan, which was about 4 months ago, indicated that the cancer has set up camp in other areas in my body. Presently, I am on Tamoxifen which surprisingly appears to be keeping my cancer quiet, for the moment.

I have been called a miracle patient more than once by my doctors. I do know that I am extremely fortunate. I have survived ovarian cancer for 17 years and now I am a breast cancer survivor for almost 5 years. I know I owe my survival to the skill and experience of my practitioners, my support system and everything that I have learned along the way. **CANCER IS NOT EASY, IT'S COMPLICATED.** I honestly have to say that this whole experience has been more positive than negative. Finding that the BRCA1 mutation is in my family has been so valuable. This insidious disease has brought my family closer and has given me an opportunity to meet the strongest and most incredible women I could ever dream of meeting.

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