

Survival and Hope *Life After Cancer*



MARLENA NEFF, 40

DIAGNOSIS: BREAST CANCER

"I had to learn it's OK if the house is a mess and people come to see me. I guess I learned what really matters. I definitely learned who my true friends are. And family – I definitely learned who matters."

Neff says she struggles with "realizing what my life is now and how dramatically my life has changed."

"For about two months I have been on a chemo pill I have really been struggling with. It is new and FDA approved, but there are still a lot of unknowns about how you will respond."

Neff said balancing her medications and the fatigue and side effects they produce have been a challenge. She has coped with anxiety and depression, too.

And Neff worries about her cancer returning. "With my ONCO score being so high, I have to look at if and not when," she said.

"I tell myself I fought it before, and I will fight it again. I am trying to prepare myself for it and being OK if it does come back."

Neff recently made the decision to find an oncologist willing to address her concerns about making the best choices possible to prevent a recurrence.

"I asked is there anything we can do to make sure there is no more cancer now?" The margins weren't clear, the chemo and radiation helped, but no one told me the cancer is gone.

"Now I am doing everything I can to make sure the cancer doesn't come back."

Neff did not join a support group until she had completed her treatments. "I didn't know there were groups available out here," she said. "I have been doing support groups maybe nine months at most."

"I found out about the Journey through Cancer workshops, and my husband was allowed to go with me."

Caregiver Perspective

Ken Neff said when he heard his wife's cancer diagnosis, "I was shocked and a little scared, but knew I needed to be strong for her."

"Cancer changes things a lot. Sometimes it makes you a lot stronger because you have to lean on each other. You have to trust each other that it is going to be OK. Sometimes it is difficult because you are dealing with a situation that is out of your control."

"In the course of Marlena's treatment, I have done literally everything: fed her, showered her, dressed/undressed her, cooked, cleaned, grocery shopped, you name it."

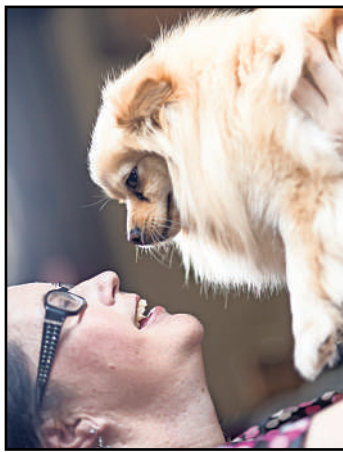
"I make sure she takes her medicine. When she had surgeries, I dressed wounds and changed dressing. With radiation, I put on burn and lidocaine creams. I drive to appointments."

Ken said surviving cancer is "all about the support. If you have a good support system, then you can work through it. It's not going to be easy, but she has a loving husband and three loving kids to help her."

“I guess I learned what really matters”.

The Basics:

- **RESIDENCE:** Victorville
- **OCCUPATION:** Previously had a family-owned youth sports photography business
- **FAMILY:** Ken, 41; husband; daughter Michaela, 21 at home part time; Kenneth, son, 17; Jeremiah, 13
- **HOBBIES:** Bible journaling, crafts
- **PHILOSOPHY:** For the last two-plus years: Stay strong



By Alberta Hale Crigler

Marlena Neff was cleaning house one day when she bent over, took a deep breath, put her hand on her chest, and felt a lump. When her husband came home from work, she asked him if he felt it too, and he did. She still remembers the day she received her breast cancer diagnosis: Oct. 2, 2015. She was 38 years old.

"I got the official diagnosis," Neff said. "Then it seemed like everything kind of flew by. Everything happened super quick."

"I had (bilateral mastectomies) Dec. 8. We did expanders to start reconstruction at the same time. I actually had two (different types of) tumors."



Neff said the surgeon was unable to get all of the tumor because it was close to her skin.

Soon after surgery, Neff was told she would undergo radiation and chemotherapy. She also received a test that could predict her chance of the cancer coming back.

"A big test that not many people know about is the Oncotype DX test, which lets you know what your chances of recurrence are, depending on treatment. I scored a 37. Low is 0-18, moderate is 18-31, and over 31 is high."

Neff has faced a host of complications since her surgery. During the reconstruction process, she had difficulties with wounds closing. One such complication resulted in a "major infection" which required a 10-day hospital stay during which she was "hooked up to IVs and monitors," she said.

Neff says her outlook on life has changed a lot since her cancer diagnosis.

"I used to struggle with OCD pretty bad," she said. "I definitely had to learn what really mattered and what didn't."

"My husband is very, very supportive and has been with me through everything. He is my number one support. The Journey through Cancer workshop made me feel like they were family from day one. We felt like we were loved immediately."

"From them, I got into the Relay for Life with American Cancer Society."

"I wish I would have found a support group sooner – they have made a huge difference in my life."

"As much as I talk to my husband or kids, being able to talk to someone who has been through it, I know I am not alone out there. They have made a huge change in my life."



The American Cancer Society provides a 24 hour service to answer questions about diagnosis, insurance, local support and resources

www.cancer.org or
call 800-227-2345

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