

Survival and Hope Life After Cancer



About Me:

CITY: Apple Valley

JOB TITLE: Stay-at-home mom

FAMILY: Francisco Gutierrez, 53, husband; Roger Aguilar, 31, son; Joseph Aguilar, 25, son; Leslie Gutierrez, 17, daughter; Marcela Meza, 61, sister

HOBBIES: Hiking, gardening, activities with family and friends

PHILOSOPHY: I do not want to be a slave to my illness. I want to be different, to say to people, we have this illness but I am going to live the rest of my life.

“I was calm, I was not nervous – it was my birthday. I was happy”



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**

If you or someone you know would like to be featured in this series, please contact Liz McGiffin at liz.mcgiffin@cancer.org.

Marivel Gonzalez, 55 Type of Cancer: Breast cancer stage 2

By Alberta Hale Crigler

Marivel Gonzalez's first experience with cancer was in 1993 when her sister, Zoila Miranda, then 43, was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"They removed her breast, and she had chemo and radiation," Gonzalez said. "She was OK for one year, then she started complaining about pain in her back.

"She went to the doctor and was told her cancer had gone to her back."

Zoila had radiation again, but the cancer spread, first to her bones, and then to her lungs.

Gonzalez said finally the doctor told her: "Anything in my hands is done. You have to decide if you want to keep your sister here or take her home. She can die in peace."

"Zoila wanted to go die in Mexico," Gonzalez said. "My parents came and took her to Mexico, and she died a week later in Jalisco. She was 45."

Then, in 2002, after a breast exam, Gonzalez received a letter from her doctor saying she needed another mammogram.

"We made an appointment on my birthday," she said. "I was going to have breakfast with my boys, and I wanted to cancel the appointment, but Roger said, 'No, we can go and have lunch.'"

At the appointment, a technician marked a spot on her left breast.

"I said, 'Why did you do that?'" Gonzalez said. "She said I was going to have an ultrasound.

"I was calm, I was not nervous – it was my birthday. I was happy; I was going to

lunch with my kids, dinner and dancing with my husband."

But after the ultrasound, the technician told Gonzalez to wait for the doctor.

"The doctor came and introduced himself," she said. "He said, 'I want to exam your breast.' Then, he said, 'I want to show you your breast' (on the ultrasound).

"He said, 'What do you see here?' I said a mountain. He looked at me, and I said, 'This is cancer?' And he said, 'Yes, this is cancer.'"

"I was crying because of the shock. I told him my sister died of cancer, she was in a lot of pain, and I didn't want to die like that."

The doctor told her treatments were much more advanced than when Zoila died.

"I called my husband, and he said, 'It's not true, I don't believe you.' I don't know how I drove home. My kids were waiting. I said, 'I don't know how to tell you, I have bad news. I have cancer.'"

"I started to cry and they cried with me."

Gonzalez was told she was stage 2 and her cancer was not BRCA-positive.

"I went to investigate what kind of cancer I had," she said. "I never knew what stage my sister was or what kind of breast cancer it was.

"Now, I write out all the questions and concerns I have, and I ask my doctor and he gives me all the answers.

"On Jan. 26, 2013, they removed my left breast. They took 11 lymph nodes and they were clean. The doctor told me I didn't need chemo or radiation.



"I took Tamoxifen for five years. But after five years the doctor gave me another medicine – I forgot the name."

Gonzalez said she stopped taking it because of side effects.

But her doctor told her, "Take it or not, but if the cancer returns, it is your decision."

"I came home crying," Gonzalez said. "My son Joseph said, 'Why don't you go to City of Hope?' So, I changed doctors and went there. This doctor explained I have to take medicine because my sister's cancer returned."

Now, Gonzalez said, "I try to keep my life happy. I try to be motivated and do things I love to do.

"Soon, we are going to see my brothers in Jalisco, Mexico. We have a lot of fun over there. Everybody spoils me. They tell me: 'You have to take care of yourself; we don't want to lose another sister.'"

Seeking help:

When Marivel Gonzalez was diagnosed with breast cancer, she wanted to learn about it in Spanish.

That led her to Mujer a Mujer (Woman to Woman), a Spanish language support group founded in 2011 by Maria R. Garcia.

The group meets at St. Mary Medical Center's Senior Select Resource Center in Apple Valley.

"We invite Spanish-speaking people with cancer to (join us) because we can help and advise them," Gonzalez said. "Sometimes only we can help; you feel lonely and your family doesn't always understand," she said.

"The medicine makes me so tired. Other times I have a lot of energy." We talk to other friends taking medicine, and they say, 'I am the same.'"

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