

I Want to Try – A Kerfuffle with Breast Cancer

An Interview with Gayanne Stanley

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“There was no reality in this deity-less life that would take me from my daughter. I am strong, I am healthy, my body will heal.” -The survivor, Gayanne Stanley.

Before Mother’s Day.

There Gayanne resided with her family in a country club in Henderson, Nevada. Her life consisted of taking care of her 2-year-old daughter at the time, and then on, even being involved with her school’s education board. Being athletic was a necessity, playing sets of tennis in the scorching desert heat, she never ceased an opportunity to be outside and have fun. Taking time and having medical field experience was a must, further expanding her mind and knowledge to help others, would soon be used to self-identify an odd lump in her left breast. It was in the middle of April, after a shower, looking at herself in the mirror she noticed an odd lump accumulating. With her experience in the field, feeling it, she knew exactly what it was for she had examined it in other patients. Immediately making an appointment, she scheduled a breast exam with her gynecologist a week after her discovery. The test was conducted with a Mammogram, a device that used a process of low x-rays to examine the human breast for diagnosis and screenings. After the results came back as negative, there was nothing detected. She knew for certain that there was something there, she urged her doctor to touch it for herself, feeling a stone-hard lump. They then scheduled an ultrasound the following week. A sense of uncertainty clouded Gayanne, as the ultrasound found the lump portrayed in pictures, she had a “Fine Needle Biopsy”, which is taking a cylindrical portion of the tumor out to confirm suspected cancer. Upon putting this tube into her breast, the needle hit a hard lump, even having

to jam it in to extract a sample. “There is no body cavity that cannot be reached with a number fourteen needle and a good strong arm.” (Shem, S. 1978) Gayanne grew numb as another week had passed, a day after Mother’s Day Gayanne’s oncologist called.

Prognosis.

“It’s full-on cancer, you’re in it for the whole ride, it’s going to be a long journey.” Gayanne's oncologist calls the morning after Mother’s Day. She was diagnosed with “Invasive Ductal Breast Carcinoma (IDC), in the left milk duct, Stage 1c”. With her daughter in her arms, she answers the phone to the news. In minutes, at that moment in time, she describes feeling lost. Feeling lost and alone, she contemplated even telling her family. She didn’t want to tell her family, she cried for fear of who’s going to take care of her daughter. What’s going to happen to her marriage (which was already uncertain), homes and the cars, work along with other tasks and bills. Then surgery struck her in the head. She decided to call her mother-in-law to tell her the news, the advice was to tell the family. She called her own mother, who had already experienced what death was like in the family on multiple occasions. She realized while on the phone with her sobbing mother that, “Even though I’m going to have a long journey ahead of me, I am going to be fine, I am going to make it out of this.” Now was a matter of consoling others, that transference from being concerned turned into being strong not only for herself and others. It acted as an alleviating-numbing agent. It was time to be in a state of neutrality, she needed to gather all the data and information pertaining to her prognosis and pull the lever on the ride to survive. “A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future” (Camus, A., & O'Brien, J. 1942)

Treatment.

Being afraid, stubborn, and very strong throughout the prognosis, Gayanne adopted a mindset of “mind over matter”. Having grown up Lutheran, life’s experiences had shown her enough, and pushed her towards not being religious. Cancer cemented her atheistic view of the so-called deity up in the sky. She felt like a good human, relying on her own power and free will to push through the treatment process of her journey. At times she would feel alone, her family wasn’t as involved in the process and in a way, it pushed her mind to tell her body some reaffirming chants. Every day, multiple times a day, even to this day. Gayanne would recite the following to her soul, “I am Strong, I am Healthy, my body will Heal.” Over and over, until she started to scream it. “What is an optimist? The man who says, "It's worse everywhere else. We're better off than the rest of the world. We've been lucky." He is happy with things as they are and he doesn't torment himself. What is a pessimist? The man who says, "Things are fine everywhere but here. Everyone else is better off than we are. We're the only ones who've had a bad break” (Solzhenitsyn Aleksandr 1968). Affirmation aside, she thought it best to get familiar with the treatment plan as well as the doctors who would be treating her. Her relationship with her gynecologist goes back, she was there at the time of her daughter’s birth, and Gayanne scheduled frequent checkups well before her prognosis. As for her oncologist, she knew nothing, though through frequent visits, a relationship developed. Her treatment plan devised by her team goes as follows,

Lumpectomy/Quadrantectomy – Surgery	Took about 1/4 of the breast tissue with the surgery. They also did a sentinel node biopsy at the time of surgery. What that means is that they removed 4 lymph nodes in her left armpit area and looked at them under the microscope while she was under anesthesia to see if there was any cancer in those lymph nodes. She was fortunate that there was none. Results were then taken and an Oncotype DX was done. Came back moderately aggressive.
4- Rounds of Chemo treatment -Doctor “tricked” her into thinking it was only 4-rounds, in order to keep her going, told her she’d have another 4-more to go. Taxol – last 4 rounds. Emend – medicine for preventing allergic reaction from chemo.	She had Adriamycin (known as the Red Devil) and Cytosan via. IV catheter into her right arm, inside elbow. Days after, signs of fever took place and she had to rush to the oncologist. Then diagnosed with leukopenia, meaning the white blood cell count had dropped to nearly non-existent, and her immune system was shutting down. Placing her to spend a week in-home isolation.

Monthly Injections: Neupogen – increases white blood cell count. Coumadin - redness in her right arm, near the IV site. Diagnosed with a blood clot. Lupron- stops menstrual cycles	She got neutropenia after her first treatment. - decreased dosage for the AC combination. Went the day before each chemo treatment. -Coumadin daily, also took proTime test for blood-clots. - Lupron, stops estrogen production, prevents cancer from growing near the breast area.
Radiation-beginning Radiation – end -Tamoxifen, to take up cellular space from breast cancer cells moving, caused hot flashes.	She had purple-dot tattoos, so technicians know where to line them up for radiation beams. ``37 badges of honor” in rib cage and middle chest, from 37 radiation treatments. Suffered tired and sore skin.

New Normal. As chemotherapy took out a lot of white blood cells from Gayanne’s body, acclimating to a new normal was the next step in her road to her body’s recovery. Her body was weak, even transitioning from the kitchen to the living room, she couldn’t help but rest on the floor a few minutes at a time. She was bed-bound, isolated from human contact for fear of

contracting sickness. In this time, she researched greatly on her illness, reading scientific documents, and protocols. At the request of a medical professional, she was given access to a website that had a spreadsheet. When your data is filled out, it is calculated based on previous patients and the advancement of the medical world, a curated spreadsheet of data and information. Having all the facts and information, no matter how hard it is for her to read what she might go through, understanding the data was most important to her. She sought bibliotherapy as a means of cultivating and reaffirming her inner strength. Reading books like, *Dr Susan Love's Breast Book*, *Chicken Soup for the Breast Cancer Survivor's Soul*, *Don't Bet Against Me*, *It's Not About the Bike*.

Over time, while sticking through treatment and refraining from human contact, she started to gain her strength back. From movement, to light interactions, she was able and ready to start going back to daily life with her “new-normal.” Her medical and other world life were kept separate. On her frequent outings, such as grocery stores, she would get stares from bystanders. Inflicting a perception that she wasn’t normal – a misfit even. She felt different, but changed. At times she would think to herself, “What if I wore a breast cancer awareness pink ribboned hat, then maybe the people who stare would at least know why I don’t have any hair.” This all changed while attending my partner’s company Christmas party. Gayanne was bald, but dressed with a wig. She put on make-up and was ready to go back to her old self, laugh and have fun, party. Upon entertaining conversations with the various couples at the event, one individual stood out. She couldn’t quite understand where she knew him from, but didn’t bother to say. Her head was foggy from all the treatments, she thought she was spaced out and that he was just another individual at the event. As the night went on, she couldn’t stop thinking as to where she knew him from. And then as she was alone by the bar, she was approached by the individual. He goes,

“I can see you staring at me, wondering as to where you know me from, I’m your radiation oncologist Gayanne.” She was perplexed, he looked entirely different to her, she had tried to compartmentalize her experience in the medical world as a patient and the outside one. This interaction intersected the two worlds. Gayanne started to learn acceptance, and allowed it to grow within herself. Though, with her affirmations and mind-over-matter mentality, “Pain is temporary. It may last a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a year, but eventually it will subside and something else will take its place. If I quit, however, it lasts forever.” (Armstrong, L. 2001).

What Matters Most. She used to fear for her daughter not having a mother, now she does not fear death. In the event that she was to pass, she said, “I would like to be remembered as the life of the party, your girl knew how to have a good time, full of joy and laughter. Going out in a good way, with a bang!” “You don’t get to choose how you’re going to die. Or when. You can only decide how you’re going to live. Now.” (Canfield, J., Hansen, M. V., & Kelly, M. O. 2012)

Gayanne’s experience through breast cancer amplified her world, as well as her ability to be empathetic with anyone. What matters most to her is showing up for others, helping them.

Harnessing an inner strength and will to overcome even in the face of defeat of what the world and statistics tell you. She says, “Grief is something we feel, hope is a desire that something will come. Can be translated into “faith” in ourselves.” Confidence is quiet in her view, for being boastful lacks confidence. “Getting over, is subjective.” “It’s a word that expresses a thing that doesn’t matter.” “Acceptance is a better word.” As far as the duality of hope, and letting go.

“You can’t do both at the same time, once you reach a certain point, you either hold on or let go. It’s a ticket in hand at a pitstop, are you hopping on or is it going to pass you before you can think to make your mind.” What shows love I asked? “Wanting to try. If someone came up to me and asked, can I try, try and help you. It makes for a loving approach. Before I was sorry for

those whom I knew were going through hard times. Now I have experience and thoughts to support, and to not hesitate to express those with another. "What you learn with any disease is, even if 99% of people die, if you live, you're alive." (CON), L. S. M. L. K. 2015). I want to try. I asked Gayanne this last and final question, "If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you enter those pearly gates?" Her response was, "Welcome! You could've been naughtier, but were glad to have you."

Gayanne wouldn't say she's cancer free, for cancer can never leave. She's healthy, alive and well. Residing in Newport, her favorite word is Kerfuffle.

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