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News

Tuesday, December 21, 2010 - Holly's Story: Surviving Stage III Ovarian Cancer

Roane County resident Holly Miller was diagnosed with Stage III ovarian cancer at the age of 33. Her journey to survival has been monumental, leaving her unable to have children of her own. Miller is only one of nearly 22,000 women that are expected to be diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year. Here is Holly's story in her own words.

October 2009: Two days before leaving for a trip to Alaska with my husband, I found out that I had a cyst on my right ovary. Shortly after returning home and having surgery, the date of October 27 will forever stick out in my mind. That was the day my doctor said, "You have ovarian cancer."

My cancer journey began with a routine yearly exam. What began with, "is there anything going on that I need to be aware of" question from my doctor turned into "it's probably nothing but let me schedule an ultrasound just to be sure." My complaint to her was that I had been experiencing what I thought was severe fatigue over the past few months. I would be ready to take a nap at 2 p.m. and not get up until the next morning, that's how tired I was. I thought this to be strange because I exercised regularly and ate healthy. I also told her my menstrual cycle was out of whack. Dr. Rebecca Walker was just the beginning of many doctors that would, in a sense, save my life. The ultrasound revealed a tumor on my right ovary.

Surgery was scheduled to remove it. I awoke to the news that she not only had to remove my right ovary, but right fallopian tube as well. She informed me that she, along with Dr. David Martin, took eight samples throughout my abdomen because they had found some suspicious spots. One thing lead to another and a complete hysterectomy was done on November 12, 2009. On Thanksgiving that same year I collapsed in my garage because of a massive infection from my surgery, something that can happen after what my body had been through. I landed in the Critical Care Unit and spent a week in the hospital recovering.

The circumstances of my diagnosis were a complete fluke. Had I not been proactive in telling my doctor what was going on with my body she may not have ever suggested the ultrasound. In hindsight I had been having symptoms for quite some time; I just didn't know they were symptoms. I had been experiencing fatigue and abnormal monthly cycles but I also experienced bloating and feeling full quickly after eating. Many of the symptoms for ovarian cancer are things we as women feel all of the time and attribute to simply being a woman. Paying attention to your body is the best defense against ovarian cancer. Unlike breast cancer, with ovarian cancer there is no lump you can feel.

My husband, Bradley, and I have been married since 2001 and have known each other since we were 15 years-old. Before cancer crept its way into our lives, we had always hoped of having children. My diagnoses of Stage III ovarian cancer at the age of 33 completely closed that door. I never thought I would have to deal with a complete hysterectomy, much less cancer at my age.

I could not put what had happened to us into words. I totally avoided the ringing phone, not quite ready to face my new reality. I did have to watch Bradley fight for words as he tearfully explained what was going on. I remember watching him search for the right words to say and having tears in his eyes when he told my friends and loved ones the news.

January 2010: After severe weight loss due to my surgeries and post-surgery infection, a port was placed in my chest and I began 28 weeks of chemotherapy. I've always heard that a support system is essential when battling something so huge – and boy is it ever. During my battle I was comforted by support ranging from numerous cards, letters and e-mails to delicious meals provided by my girlfriends and neighbors. I had planned on writing thank you cards to everyone who has touched my life this past year, but I have realized what a gargantuan undertaking that would be not just on my part, but also for that of the U.S. Postal Service!

I would also love to see everyone who took such great care of us so I could thank them. The oncology nurses at Parkwest Medical Center especially rock! Dr. David Martin and Dr. Brooke Saunders along with their staff and nurses were terrific and very compassionate to me. Although I have come so far this past year, anniversaries are every day for me. Little things trigger memories and the list is too long to share. I believe it has to get better with time. On my 'cancerversary' this past October, my Facebook status read, "A year ago today I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. If I've learned nothing over the past year, I've learned that I'm a SURVIVOR."



Miller has "Gone Teal" to raise Ovarian Cancer Awareness. Nearly 100 of her friends and family members joined her at the 2010 Tennessee All Breed Charity Horse Show at Roane State Community College in October.

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Looking back on my experience with the big "C", many advertising slogans have hit home. Nike's "Just Do It" for obvious reasons. It comes down to fight or flight when you're hit with a life changing diagnosis and "Just Do It" applied to me in so many ways. Surgery: done. More IV's: done. More drugs: done. More chemo: done. L'Oreal's slogan of "Because I'm Worth It" is a good one in a hilarious kind of way. The whole "sass your way through chemo" is a mind game that if played well is more of a survival technique than anything. You better believe I'm worth it! The best one yet that hits home for all of us who have had cancer, is the American Cancer Society's "The Official Sponsor of Birthdays." There were so many times during the year after I was diagnosed that I wondered if I would be able to see another one.

If anything, I think having cancer taught me to cherish every moment. I have such a desire to 'live' that I haven't really given my body time to rest. I guess I'm addicted to feeling alive again. I love the sense of accomplishment that overwhelms me when I do something that seemed totally out of my reach last year.

That being said, I've tackled a lot this year that I'm very proud of – including rock climbing in Colorado in September 2010 with others who had cancer. For those of you who may know me, I hate asking for help. The climb forced me to kick that to the curb. Who would have thought that I would actually enjoy not only the climb, but also the soreness it brought on the next day!

Someone asked me to be 'real' about what was going on with me. 'Real' is avoiding the ringing phone because you just can't bare to answer the question, "how are you feeling" one more time. 'Real' is knowing how bad your weekend is going to be after having chemotherapy on Thursday, and 'real' is me apologizing repeatedly to my husband because I can't have children. Fighting cancer is a battle. Not just physically, but also emotionally.

A co-worker of mine came up with the "Gone Teal" idea. After being diagnosed with a cancer that 'no one my age gets diagnosed with' everyone began looking around and seeing pink. T-shirts were designed with the "Gone Teal – to support Holly Miller" slogan on the back and 'peace, love, cure ovarian cancer' on the front. I've spotted the t-shirts out and about in Knoxville and we have sent them as far away as Seattle and they've been worn as far away as Australia! It's amazing what can come from one diagnosis.

Now that I am a cancer survivor, I want to make an impact so that women everywhere will be proactive in their routine screenings so we can combat cancer. While fighting this battle, I have learned 21,880 women were expected to be diagnosed with ovarian cancer this year and 13,850 will die from it. A women's lifetime risk of having it is one in 67 which is pretty significant when you think of how many people we all know. Support ovarian cancer awareness and wear teal the first Friday of each month.

Holly's Top 10 List for Friends Battling Cancer

1. Call them – Hearing a friend's voice is priceless.
2. Send a card – I still have every card that was sent to me.
3. Write a letter (or an e-mail) – I know it's time consuming, but time is all a chemo patient has when they're stuck on the couch or in the bed.
4. Stop by for a visit – Although I didn't always have much to say, having someone in the house was comforting.
5. Send food – Food is a MUST because cooking was the last thing on my mind when I was so very sick.
6. Send a Facebook message – I looked forward to this every day!
7. Give them a hug (cancer's not contagious) – Hugs almost always made me cry, but I needed them.
8. Offer to clean their house – I was too exhausted and wiped out to simply dust the table in front of me, much less vacuum the house.
9. Do something drastic – While I was in the hospital, my co-workers decorated my house for Christmas. It wouldn't have gotten done otherwise, and when I saw it I cried like a baby. It was the best present ever!
10. Be their friend – Having a good support system is vital. Be there for your friend who was diagnosed in any way you can. They will need you to lean on and most of all – they will need you to make them laugh when times get tough.

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