

Faces of Cancer

Bringing humanity back to cancer

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Cancer, in contemporary society, is one of the most well-known diseases- if not the most well-known. From medical conferences to research laboratories to even popular culture, cancer- a disease in which abnormal cells divide uncontrollably and destroy body tissue- is studied and discussed frequently. And as expected, these close examinations of the disease are conducted through a perspective encompassed by the concepts of science and medicine. We, rightly so, are focused on the research processes and advancements of treatments pertaining to the disease. In fact, this scientific-based approach is introduced to children from a very young age, as in our modern educational systems, students are taught about the causes, outcomes, and history of cancer research. However, throughout all of this discussion, the social, psychological, and emotional issues stemming from cancer are often ignored. In this way, the aspects of humanity and interpersonal connections are almost nonexistent in many parts of healthcare and science. In order for healthcare to truly promote the wellbeing of humans, we must acknowledge the importance of social, psychological, and emotional health.

The following short profile features tell the stories of how having cancer or knowing a close friend or family member who has cancer affected the lives of these individuals, with a particular emphasis on the social implications stemming from the diagnosis of cancer and how that affected the relationships and futures of all involved.

Suzanne Black, a biology teacher at Inglemoor High School in Kenmore, Washington, has spent many years teaching students about numerous scientific concepts- including genetics, cell division, mutations, etc.- all factors associated with cancer. A knowledgeable and passionate individual, she views herself as not just a teacher, but a constant student of science, taking in new information and reading new reports with the same youthful energy and elation that she inspires in so many of her students.

But in March 2005, Black's life was turned upside down when she was diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer. "I've known and taught about cancer throughout my career," Black told me, "But it was a disease that always seemed to distant to me. When I got the news, I was absolutely shocked. The most overwhelming thing to me, was the fact that I had gotten the fourth, and most advanced stage of ovarian cancer." With low survival rates associated with the type of cancer, Black was pushed to a state of trepidation. "There's so many things I wanted to do, and still want to do in life," Black said, "And one of the scariest things to me is that I may not ever get the chance to experience some of the things I had always wanted to, with the people closest to me."

Black described how the fear and anxiety the disease gave her was not simply a result of the possibility that she may pass away early, but also tied to the people she'd



have to leave behind. “From family to close friends,” Black reminisced, “To even my students, who I care about very much, I couldn’t even begin to wrap my mind around the fact that the next time I see them may be the last. That sort of thought is not only incredibly difficult, but it can begin to affect your everyday life. Even small things such as going grocery shopping or watching a TV show you enjoy can become more meaningful, as you just want to live every aspect of life and hold onto it.”

Cancer, being a disease with numerous environmental and genetic factors associated with its cause, in many cases has a degree of suddenness and randomness that can take a significant toll on not only cancer patients, but their close friends and family members as well. “The thing that many people don’t realize,” Black said, “Is how cancer is just as impactful on patients’ friends and family. From my coworkers to my students to my family, I felt an aura of nervousness and uncertainty that would sometimes cloud the enjoyment and fun in life. Not just my life, but their lives as well.”

Still, despite the numerous hardships, chemotherapy, and doctor’s visits, Black still finds positive lessons that she has learned in the past decade and a half. “During my treatment process, I’ve had to navigate not only financially and medically, but socially and emotionally as well. Throughout all of these obstacles, I learned one key thing,” Black told me, smiling with the same vibrant vitality as always, “Even if you or a close one has cancer, or any other disease or problem, always remember to stay positive- as there’s no point in living a melancholy life. Life is beautiful. And I’ve learned that every moment, both good and bad, is a new experience that should be treasured.”

Abigail Wilt, a senior at Wenatchee High School in Wenatchee, Washington is an energetic and upbeat individual who simply loves, in her words, “living life.” “I just love being involved,” she told me, “There’s just so many things out there for all of us to do, and I don’t just want to be stagnant and do nothing- I want to try and experience new things.” And that’s exactly what she does. From being a staff reporter to joining organizations in school such as DECA and ASB to swimming, Wilt is a busy and engaged student-athlete. For the most part, her life has been one containing excitement and unique experiences.



However, when Wilt was seven years old, her uncle passed away from cancer. As a child, the concept of a life lost was both foreign and incomprehensible. “In all honesty,” Wilt said, “I was so young that I was never able to get to know my uncle very well.” Still, despite being very young, Wilt still noticed the tension and unease in her household that built up until her uncle passed away. “It was unmistakable,” Wilt remembered, “Even though I was only seven, I could see the worry in my parents’ eyes, and the general restlessness in my parents’ faces.”

The modern-day society aims to shelter young children from the violence, sadness, and negative aspects of life. However, as in Wilt’s case, knowing someone diagnosed with cancer gave her an early glimpse of the hardships of life. “I didn’t know that my uncle was going to pass,” Wilt said, “And it never crossed my mind whenever I saw him that it may be the last time I’d ever see him. But even as a child, you sense that there’s something wrong. The scary thing is- you’re not sure what’s actually wrong.”

As a young child tied to a cancer patient, understanding the extent of the disease can be both overwhelming and frightening. “I remember conducting research on the disease,” Wilt reflected, “I knew that my uncle had cancer. And I was determined to learn more about the disease. I’m not completely sure as to why- I suppose a part of me just wanted to help- not only so my uncle would get better, but also so my parents would be less sad. Instead, what I found online about cancer was extremely scary.”

After her own experience, Wilt is a firm believer of the importance of educating and guiding young people to understand the severity of certain diseases, and explaining the emotions sparked by the situation. “It’s far better for children to learn about some diseases from parents rather than by having to search online,” Wilt said, “Concepts such as death are just so foreign. It’s exponentially better to have a parent or trusted adult guiding a child while they learn about cancer and cancer treatment.”

As such, Wilt believes that communication is critical in order to maintain positive relationships between people associated with the cancer patient. “In the end,” Wilt told me, “It’s just all about being open and there for each other. Even for the youngest people in your family, someone getting cancer can be a life-changing experience. But if you can openly talk with your close friends and family and are able to talk about your true feelings and struggles without holding back, you’ll be better able to cope with the harder situation. Communication is critical- and besides- what’s the point of having close friends and family members if you can’t freely talk?”

Marne Anderson, a financial advisor at the Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS) in Seattle, Washington, has always been an active and curious person. A frequent traveler, Anderson, her husband, and their three children had been to places such as Machu Picchu, intent on learning about and experiencing new cultures and activities. “There’s so much out there in the world,” Anderson said, “What’s the point in leaving the majority of it up to your imagination?”



But on August 18, 2016, tests showed that Anderson’s cortisol levels were unusually high. “I just knew something was wrong,” Anderson said, “I had this pain, but a recent colonoscopy had shown that I was fine, and my doctor told me that I would be fine as well, and refused to listen to me.” After talking to another doctor and finally getting a colonoscopy, it was revealed that Anderson had colon cancer. “I had been failed by my doctor and the traditional medical system,” Anderson said, “The system of waiting for something to go wrong before treating someone. We discovered that 95% of my colon had been affected by cancer.”

If not for new-wave P4 medicine- medicine that’s predictive, preventative, personalized, and participatory- she wouldn’t be alive now. The frequent tests and check-ins that P4 medicine mandated helped Anderson to maintain her health and wellbeing, which further contributed to keeping her spirits up as well. “I’ll always be thankful to the scientists and doctors behind P4 medicine,” Anderson said, “But one of the things that was hardest for me was actually having to adjust my relationships and social life after being diagnosed. Cancer was a ‘wake-up call’. At the time of diagnosis, I was a 53-year-old woman with 3 teenagers, a husband, a career and so many balls in the

air with a busy life. I was forced to look in the mirror and realize that it all could all disappear in an instant.”

After her close brush with death and her battle with cancer, Anderson realized the importance of health and wellness. “Health and wellness are so much more valuable than material possessions, status and the ‘appearance’ of a perfect life,” Anderson said, “And that includes your social life-what I now want out of life is a real, authentic life where I am living my truth daily. I no longer have the time to waste dancing for other people’s version of who they want me to be. I need to be exactly who I am instead of pleasing everyone else.”

These lessons that Anderson learned has actually changed her life, with Anderson simplifying her life with real friendships, which helped and improved her health and wellness along with her spirit, making her much more joyful now. “I believe cancer was a gift for me,” Anderson told me, “I have changed my perspective and am much more grateful. My life has become much more magical and meaningful. I pay attention to the synchronicities that occur and the people and situations that present themselves. I am in utter wonder of the beautiful people I have met since my cancer diagnosis. The caregivers were all so amazing and I love all of my doctors. They showed empathy for me along with providing sound medical advice and treatment.”

If anything, colon cancer further reaffirmed Anderson’s passion to travel and enjoy every aspect of life. “Simply, I’ve learned that that life is to be lived,” Anderson mused, “That what we eat, drink, how much we sleep and how we take care of ourselves is our responsibility and ours alone. There should be no blaming for our lives and our circumstances. We all need to play the hand we are dealt with and live it the best we can.”

And for anybody who is ever diagnosed with cancer, or has a close friend or family member be diagnosed, Anderson has a few pieces of advice. “I recommend that when life throws you lemons, it’s a wake-up call from the universe to pivot your thinking and question everything,” Anderson said, “Stay open and learn. Take full advantage of both western and eastern medicine and all things in between. The best advice is to *LOVE*. When you feel the negative emotions creep in, sit in meditation, breathe and always ask yourself questions. What am I learning? How am I growing? And most importantly, how can I be a beacon of love for myself and for others?”

Claudia Ludwig, the director of Systems Education Experiences (SEE) at the Institute of Systems Biology (ISB) in Seattle, Washington, has been involved in STEM education for 20 years and has vast experience with biology and the other sciences. An intelligent and well-informed person, Ludwig understands cancer well and has known multiple people who have been diagnosed with the disease.



But in 2009, Ludwig’s best friend was diagnosed with breast cancer. “I just remember being so shocked,” Ludwig told me, “No matter how frequently you’ve heard of people getting cancer, each new time is just as shocking and life-changing. It just so happened that this case would be the most impactful on me, as my best friend since I

was seven years old had been diagnosed with breast cancer.” Ludwig was exceptionally close to her. “Her family was my family,” Ludwig said, “She had two kids and a husband, and I knew all of them very well.”

At first, there was hope. Ludwig’s friend had been in remission for four years. However, cancer came back, this time in the liver, creating an even more serious situation. “She lived in Chicago,” Ludwig said, “And would take a two-hour train ride to get treatment, as that’s where the best doctors were located. She had the best facilities, a fantastic medical staff, I always hoped that everything would be fine.” Ludwig began to visit her friend more frequently, flying to Chicago multiple times a year from Seattle, trying to spend as much time with her as possible.

“It makes you closer,” Ludwig said, “But puts stress on your relationship. There’s always this feeling that every time you’re together, it may be the last time. I sometimes wish that I had taken a more active, or even bossy role in terms of helping her. But that wasn’t the role I played in her life. The time I spent with her was friend time.” In 2015, Ludwig’s friend passed away.

“What was really hard on her was that she had a huge family,” Ludwig remembered, “She wanted to spend time with people, but it was hard to balance her life. And she was so optimistic that she would beat it. I can’t help but feel as if we should have been thinking about what we should do without her.” With close friends and family, everybody has different roles, and this process of planning for a future without them is one that is both difficult and life-altering, and something that many struggle with.

“The worst thing is that things could have been different,” Ludwig began, “If she had cancer five years later, with the advances with P4 medicine and other branches of science, I’m confident that she would have survived. I’m confident that if there was true P4 medicine then, her situation would have been different. She may never have gotten cancer, or it would have been quickly solved. Her disease was based in genetic mutation, which came from her father’s side. But she didn’t know her father, and only after finally being able to contact him, found out that his sisters had battled breast cancer as well. With P4 medicine, we would have been able to discover and monitor this mutation much earlier. We face these incredible losses, when they don’t have to be losses.”

Today, after one of the most difficult situations in her life, Ludwig has advice for everybody in a similar situation. “Everybody needs to live and appreciate every day they have,” Ludwig said, “From car accidents to diseases, life can end very quickly. So enjoy every moment you have, and spend as much time as possible with your close friends and family. Live in the moment.”