



JEAN SHIPOS

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Cancer: Five Years and Counting

Ovarian Cancer. It strikes fear in the hearts of women everywhere because it isn't easily detected and is often caught too late. When Jean Shipos was diagnosed with ovarian cancer the first time, she admits, "I never thought I was going to die. I was always on the go go, go." After surgery, her oncologist felt that they had removed all of the cancer and there wasn't any need for either chemotherapy or radiation. So when she received a clean bill of health, it was a breath of fresh air for Jean, who viewed the cancer as an inconvenient interruption in her life. "When I passed my five year victory mark I was thrilled," Jean said.

Unfortunately, only a few weeks later, Jean got bad news. *The cancer was back.* "It was a shock to me," Jean concedes. After all, she was vigilant about her health and armed herself with quarterly checkups, semi-annual Cat Scans and a "fearless" attitude. So when Jean found out about the recurrence of the disease, and the chemotherapy, it really took a toll on her.

Once the treatments began, chemotherapy was her cancer-mirror. It wasn't the sickness that resulted from chemo, or feeling dead-tired or even the pain in her legs that was so unbearable at times that it made her cry. For Jean, it was losing her hair. Jean started losing it exactly 14 days after the first chemo treatment. From Jean's perspective, "You can hide from the cancer because it is on the inside," but being bald was something else. "I was obsessed with losing my hair. I tried wigs; I tried hats; nothing made me happy. I focused on this bald, eyebrow-less, eyelash-less person staring back at me in the bathroom mirror, and couldn't see past the loss of hair. It made me see my vulnerability," Jean explains. Her hair loss was the outward manifestation of a fact that she could no longer ignore. Jean understood, "I'm not going to live forever," and the cancer became real to her.

Unlike the first time she was diagnosed and treated, Jean was finding it nearly impossible to face this second bout with ovarian cancer. Chemotherapy made Jean "an emotional basket case" and she often found herself crying for no apparent reason. "I thought about everything I had to do and couldn't ... typical old-fashioned woman, well-trained by my mother. There was cooking, cleaning, laundry, commitments ... who would do them, how would they get done? I felt like a burden, like I was letting everyone down." Though she didn't realize it was happening, Jean gradually descended into a deep depression.

After a few conversations she had with alert staff members at Fox Chase, her cancer treatment center, Jean received a call from a counselor. "Do you know you're in a really deep depression?" the counselor asked. No, Jean hadn't realized it, but that call was the beginning of specialized therapy sessions during which Jean got in touch with the many soul-searchingly difficult issues she had been pushing aside. Jean's "incredibly understanding" counselor told her "it was ok to be sick, it was ok to gain or lose weight; it was ok not to do everything I did before." Until then, Jean recognized, "I was really beating myself up for not being superwoman any longer. I had to get past that and allow people to care for me. It was a hard lesson and I don't think I was a very gracious patient."

With a new understanding, during those very challenging months, Jean did whatever she could. Some days all she could do was take a shower...and some days not even that much. Other days she would clean out a drawer, do a project that had previously been put off or read the touching cards sent by her many friends and coworkers. For focus, she would go online and work on the last three credits she needed to complete her MBA. She remembers, "It took all of my waking energy to do those final papers and PowerPoints." Yet it gave her something to look forward to, and she got it done. For relaxation ("on good weekends when I felt human"), Jean would travel to the New Jersey shore and soak up the soothing energy of sea breezes and ocean rhythms.

For support and inspiration, Jean turned mostly to her spouse, Mike. While statistics show that many men can't handle their spouse's illness and cheat or leave, Jean always felt Mike was there for her. "He never gave up on me and wouldn't let me give up or give in," Jean explains. "He was always upbeat and loving. He never criticized my appearance. He constantly said we'd get through this together." Jean was equally blessed through her children, especially her youngest daughter Nicole. Jean could call and say she was having a bad day, which was Jean-code for "I can't stop crying, or vomiting, or my legs hurt so bad that I didn't know what to do." Nicole would come home and massage her legs or sometimes just hold and rock her. About them Jean has only the greatest praise, "They stepped up and stepped in."

Still, while all the treatment was terrible for Jean, the thing that continued to haunt her the most was the loss of her hair. Then, one day while Jean and her daughter were out having lunch, Jean had an epiphany. Sitting at a nearby table was a "beautiful, young, bald woman" who, Jean says, "Took my breath away." Thinking that she too had cancer, and much to her daughter's chagrin, Jean went over to talk to her. To Jean's surprise, the young woman did not have cancer but alopecia, a disease that causes hair loss; there is no cure for it. She told Jean she had tried hats and wigs. But after a while she came to appreciate that her true beauty came from who she was inside, in her heart, not the hair on her head. She was Jean's turning point because, after all, Jean's hair would grow back someday. The young woman's never would. Afterward, Jean had a long talk with herself, chiding, "She's sitting there so proud. She's never getting her hair back...and you're being a baby over this." From that woman Jean learned her most important lesson: "what is truly important comes from your heart and soul." And she was given the most valuable gift when, Jean says, the woman "gave me back my pride. She made me realize how vain I had been and that I needed to re-focus my energies."

That was over five years ago. Counting her blessings, Jean is happy to say she is now past the second Five Year Mark and is healthy. She feels very fortunate. Instead of "rushing through life like a maniac" and not appreciating each minute, she sees each day as a gift. Though she still struggles with over-booking, over-committing, and rushing around, she seriously and consciously makes the effort to "slow down and appreciate my gift of life." Part of sharing that gift is sharing her story with other women, giving them hope and encouragement. Another part of her sharing is The Teal Tea Foundation, a non-profit which hosts an annual fundraiser. Jean says she organized the foundation "to make sure that my daughters never go through ovarian cancer," and because "I wanted to try to stop other women from dying from this disease and from their months of fighting and suffering." Through The Teal Tea Foundation, Jean raises awareness and supplies funding for much needed research into new treatments and a cure. And, she proudly affirms, "The Foundation is making a difference."

Jean's advice to other women is strong and powerful: "I believe each of us has inside her heart the power to change the world...with a dream and the guts to take positive action. Don't postpone things for tomorrow. Don't believe that you will always have plenty of time in the future...Start NOW. Dream BIG and don't let *anything* stop you from reaching your dreams. One person **can** change the world. One person starts the ripple that gets larger and larger and larger. Be positive and BELIEVE!"

CHEERS TO YOU, JEAN!

None of us wants to think about cancer

Or our lives being cut short by illness

But for those of us for whom it is our reality

We are blessed by women, *like you*, who have been there and back

And reach out a hand to pull us through the tunnel and into the light.

We call them angels...

To learn more about Jean Shipos, The Teal Tea Foundation, or for information about ovarian cancer, go to <http://www.tealtea.com>