Article Series Inspirational Stories Breast

Stephanie’s story: Finding the light

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Stephanie W.

LIVING WITH CANCER SINCE 2015

Stephanie W. is used to helping others come to terms with their illness. As a hospice nurse, she was a person patients relied on in their darkest times. But one day in 2015, she woke up from her nap to a phone call that she was not ready for. It was one that put her on the other side of the nurse-patient relationship.

> “The woman on the other end said, ‘I’m sorry to tell you, but you have breast cancer.’ And I just said, ‘Can I call you tomorrow so we can discuss this? You interrupted my nap.’”

The news was too much, and all Stephanie wanted to do was go back to bed and pretend like it was a dream. But once her husband came home and they talked, reality began to set in. Together, they went into the hospital for weeks of scans and tests. She learned that the cancer had spread to her bones. Stephanie received the diagnosis of
de novo Stage 4 metastatic breast cancer, or mBC.

> “I felt completely blindsided. I know my body well, and I didn’t feel anything. I regularly did breast self-exams and went for screening mammograms. And I had no family history.”

However, Stephanie didn’t let this stop her from moving forward with her life. She went through treatment while still caring for her patients. She had a bilateral mastectomy and went through chemotherapy, all while working seven days on and seven days off as a hospice nurse.

Being an advocate for her treatment was especially important to Stephanie. She made sure she found a doctor who she connected with and inspired her to keep fighting.

> “My doctor was truly amazing, because he knew who I was as a person. He answered all my questions, and his positive attitude gave me hope that I would be around for a long time.”

Stephanie was grateful to have a job that allowed her to take some time off to recover from each round of treatment. Still, balancing treatment with work wasn’t easy. Not only because of the side effects, but also because she was treating people who were near the end of their lives while coming to terms with her own diagnosis. One of them even had her type of cancer, and Stephanie remembers a moving conversation they had.

> “One day she told me that she knew a secret about me; that I had the same disease that she had. She said that she was dying, but that she was praying every day that I would live. We both sat there and cried.”

Moments like these, as well as the support from her family and birth of her grandchild, inspired Stephanie to keep fighting. The time came when she had to stop working due to health issues, which was hard for her. But Stephanie isn’t one to stay in the dark for long. All day, every day, she searched on the internet for groups who could help her.

> “Eventually, I found out about a group for mBC called Living Beyond Breast Cancer, and I went to my first conference. That’s when I learned about the research going on around this type of cancer. More importantly, I learned that I was not the only African American woman who had it.”

Today, Stephanie is active in a number of groups and continues to be a light for those who are facing their darkest times. She volunteers with hospice, her local cancer center and in a hospital as a patient and family experience volunteer. She is an advocate, especially for women of color with mBC, and offers her time to help others understand their diagnosis and what their healthcare teams are saying. She wants to make sure they are making the best decisions for themselves. She also maintains a Facebook group called “Team Stephanie,” which is a place where she can share her story and advocate for others with the support of her friends and family.

> “Positive attitude, God, supportive family and friends and a medical team that I trust all play together in my life as a thriver of mBC."