Article Series Inspirational Stories

Remembering Judi

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[Judi] There's nothing you can control in your life in terms of circumstances, absolutely nothing.

There's nothing to say; there's nothing you can do. You can't change it.

But you can always control how you respond to them.

[ocean waves breaking]

[gentle piano music] I've had 26 tumors taken out of me. When I first was diagnosed, I was very depressed about it.

I truly believed that if I had a year, I was lucky.

Because my cancer is stage four, thyroid cancer. And what I thought that meant was, I was on the way out.

I've since learned it doesn't mean that. It just means it's incurable. It just means we have to keep finding different ways to fight it and treat it and try to hold it back.

[crowd singing] Happy birthday to you.

[Judi] I think it's important to do things for the first time no matter how old you are.

I'm 68 and I'm still doing things for the first time.

[Judi] I am so passionately involved with beauty and art. Kinda late in life to start oil painting at 67, but it's turned out really well.

I also write spoken word and poetry.

I believe in my mask, this made up me. And I think I directed my first film. You go, not you.

You just keep bowing. And so...Let's try that again.

[Female Friend] Oh, I met Judi when I was 16, I want to say, and she was my drama teacher.

She's a friend and a mentor, and she's just an amazing human being.

[Judi] Cut. That was very good, Tammy. I liked it.

[Male Friend] She's like this sprite that kind of bounces around the world making things better, you know?

[Judi] I am so happy to see you.

[Director] Behind the scenes hug.

[Judi] I love you. Thank you. I love you!

[Friend] I love that, that she's just been kind of living with this thing, and it's not great, but it's also not stopping her from doing her thing.

[Judi] Now, I am an artist in residence for a professional dance company out of Denver. It's the joy of my life. It's my true passion.

We're getting darn close, we're only eight weeks away, I think.

[Director] Between then and now, do you just put it out of your head?

[Judi] I do, actually.

[Director] 'Cause what are you gonna do, right?

[Judi] That's exactly what I do, yeah. I live my life. It's real. The pain is real. The challenges are real. The fear is real.

You do have to find a new normal. I laugh with my doctors.

My husband and I have found a way to be honest with each other.

He was verklempt. I mean, he was about to lose his best friend here.

We had no idea what was going to happen and at a certain point I had to say, "Buddy, I gotta be able to cry when I feel like I need to cry. I gotta be able to face this, 'cause I don't have the energy to pretend so that you don't hurt."

We actually open tonight. I'm in some ways overwhelmed with the joy of this, and in other ways, it just seems to me that this is just one more step in the story of what I get to do with my life.

When you've been diagnosed with stage four cancer, you have this laser-like focus on the moment that you're living in-on the potential for joy and beauty and love.

And in some ways, it's a blessing.

[cheering]

I feel like I've been given a gift.

It's the best time of my life, and I know what my priorities are. And living every day with no regrets is one of them.

We're gonna gather up all of the positive energy, and we're going to bring it to us, and we're going to release it with a yes!

[Crowd] Yes!

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF JUDI
1949-2021

When Judi walks into a room, laughter and smiles are sure to follow. At 68 years old, she has a certain swagger and a vibrant energy that's matched only by her active grandchildren. She channels that energy into poetry, mentorship, writing, painting and spreading joy wherever she goes.

> When you've been diagnosed with stage IV cancer, you have this laser-like focus on the moment that you're living in.

Judi channels this positive focus into everything she does. It shapes her painting and fuels her other creative passions, which include partnering with a former student as an artist-in-residence at her professional dance company.

The journey

Like most people, Judi was shocked when she was diagnosed with stage IV thyroid cancer in 2012. Since then, she's had six surgeries, as well as other treatments. One of the surgeries was to remove a large tumor from the back of her throat. That surgery brought with it the risk that Judi—a spoken word poet, teacher and grandmother—could permanently lose her voice.

The possibility of losing her voice was terrifying. Thankfully, Judi's surgeon, someone she came to know well and trust completely, suggested an innovative alternative: a robot usually used to perform tonsillectomies could remove the tumor through her mouth rather than her neck. Judi was optimistic and agreed to move forward. To her relief, the surgery was successful. To this day, Judi continues to use her powerful voice to speak up, tell her story and spread her light to the people around her.

Article slides



Judi at a rehearsal for her show.



Judi with friends in her backyard in Sacramento, CA.



Judi with a performer backstage.



Judi works out with her personal trainer.



Judi's doctor examines her at a routine checkup.

Getting to joy

Judi has chosen to face the world with joy and courage. So it's surprising to learn that initially she kept her fear and sadness to herself. It's only been in the past few years that she has decided to be truly open about her struggle with cancer. And "live joy—not chase it."

> I recognized that if I could embrace my grief and my sorrow with the same passion that I did the things that I have passion about and that bring joy into my life, then I could get over an emotional hump, and I could be better at being a survivor and move away from being a victim.

Judi's capacity for joy is hard to match, as is her openness about the grief and sorrow she's experienced. It's her mission to accept every part of the cancer

journey, and to turn it into something positive and meaningful. With her steadfast optimism and the support of her husband and community, Judi welcomes a life shaped by art, poems, stories and defining moments.

> You get to choose every day who you're going to be and what you're going to bring to the table. You can choose to be afraid. You can choose to be filled with grief and sorrow. And sometimes you have to do that. But you also get to choose joy.