

WHEN LIGHTNING STRIKES TWICE: SHAWNA SHEAMAN HAS BATTLED TWO CANCER DIAGNOSES

There are few words more feared in the English language than, “Your tests came back positive for cancer.” From that point forward, the receivers of such news see their lives changed forever. Unfortunately, Shawna Sheaman has heard those words on two separate occasions, first for leukemia, and, most recently, for breast cancer. Sheaman’s battle with cancer must sometimes seem endless to her. But it has also been a journey that has provided immeasurable lessons.

Q: When were you first diagnosed with cancer and what was your prognosis?

A: I was diagnosed in June 2000 with Philadelphia chromosome positive, Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia (CML). I was 28 years old. My oncologist explained to me that there was no cure for CML, the gold standard for treatment was Interferon-ARC, a chemotherapy that would make me feel like I had the flu all of the time. The only real chance I had to eradicate the disease was a bone marrow transplant. I had a five-to-seven-year life expectancy without a successful bone marrow transplant.

Q: What was it like for you upon first hearing that news?

A: When I was diagnosed with CML, I was so scared, and frustrated and sad. My son, Spencer, was born in March of 1998. I found out I was pregnant with him in August of 2007. That very same month I also learned my mom was diagnosed with two types of cancer: uterine cancer and small cell cancer. She spent the next nine months having surgery, chemo and radiation treatments, it was incredibly difficult for her. She ended up passing away in November of 1998. I was scared that I was going to have to go through all of that with a 2-year-old, I was scared of dying and leaving behind a son that would

probably never remember me. I remember with the CML diagnosis, being very afraid, but the more I researched the subject and the more I thought about my little boy, the more I emphatically decided that I was going to kick cancer’s butt no matter what.

Q: Was there a period of not knowing what



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to do, or did you apply yourself toward beating the disease immediately?

A: After talking to my doctor about my choices, I did not like the Interferon-ARC option. I did not want to spend the rest of what looked to be a short life sick all the time. For the bone marrow transplant, I had no siblings for a complete donor match. My doctor mentioned a clinical trial for a drug called STI-571. The drug had showed promise in people that were in the “chronic” phase of the disease. He suggested that I also get a second opinion to feel comfortable with my decision. In September 1998, I traveled to two of the top cancer centers in the US: MD Anderson

in Houston, TX, and Fred Hutchison in Seattle, WA. I wanted to talk to everyone I could about the options I had. In both cases they repeated what my local oncologist had said: bone marrow transplant or get on the study. Unfortunately the drug (STI-571) had only been in human studies since 1998, so there was not a lot to go on, but what we did see was the drug had promise. I decided that I had to be part of the study, even if it didn’t help me, maybe it would help advance the study of the disease and help someone else in the future.

Q: What was the most difficult part of your treatments?

A: The treatment with STI-571 was simple — take four pills once daily, get blood checked weekly, have a bone marrow biopsy every three months. The hardest part of this process, though one might think it was the pain of the bone marrow biopsy, was actually waiting for the results of the biopsy. In the spring of 2001, STI-571 was approved by the FDA for sale as Gleevec. I have taken the drug every day for close to 10 years. Although I am no longer part of the study group, I continue provide feedback and data to the research team, as we do not know what the long-term outlook is or will be. The good news is that almost 10 years later, they still cannot detect the disease in my body! The better news is that, in the same 10 years, they have developed three more drugs for the treatment of CML that have provided positive results in people who could not tolerate Gleevec or did not have a complete response on Gleevec.

Q: What was the most surprising part of the challenge you faced?

A: In February 2009, I was diagnosed with “Invasive, Stage 2, Grade 3, Triple Negative, Intraductal Carcinoma” breast cancer. I was 37 years old. During a self-exam in January 2009, I found a lump underneath my left breast. After an ultra sound, an MRI and a needle biopsy, it was confirmed that I had “very aggressively grow-



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ing breast cancer.” I thought, “Are you kidding me? What kind of sick joke is this — cancer twice, and in such a short period of time!” I was so angry, I didn’t know what to think at first. Then, I remembered Spence (now 11 years old), and I told myself that it was time to “cowgirl up” and figure out a way to get through this one, too. I quickly found out that with breast cancer, as with the CML, my treatment regimen had to be a collaborative effort, one that I was going to have to take charge of. The toughest part of the breast cancer experience wasn’t the five surgeries or deciding to have bi-lateral mastectomies. Without a doubt, it was chemotherapy. There were several times that I had told my dad, “If I feel

like this tomorrow, just promise you will shoot me.” I remember finishing my third round of chemo and everyone around me — my doctor, the nurses, my friends and family — were all so excited. They kept saying, “You’re half-way there!” And I remember crying and thinking, “I am ONLY half-way there. How can I do this for three more months?!” There were days that I thought that I wouldn’t make it through, but I did, and life couldn’t be better!

Q: What was your greatest source of support and how did it help you?

A: I am blessed with amazing friends, co-workers and family that helped me through both of my battles. I would be remiss if I didn’t give them all credit for keeping my spirits up, taking care of me, bringing food to my home and sending hundreds of cards. My son Spencer was so attentive and helpful. But, I have to say that my dad was my rock. He was there EVERY DAY, making sure that both Spencer and I were fed and taken care of. He became the maid, the gardener, the handyman and my nurse. He went to every doctor’s appointment, every surgery, every procedure. He slept on my bedroom floor just in case I needed him. Without him, I do not think I could have made it through this past year.

Q: How has having cancer changed your perspective?

A: I think everyone expects you to say that life is more precious, the sky is a deeper shade of blue and the sun is brighter after surviving cancer. The truth is, life has always been precious, the sky has always been blue and the sun has always been a bright star. What it comes down to is that, whether you have cancer or no health issues at all, you have to live each day like it is your last — because it might be. I was always a very focused individual, hard-working and driven. I have to admit that for a long time I lived to work. After two rounds of cancer I am less driven — no less hard-working — but I am now working to live. I realize that if I am gone from this life I am no longer scared for me. I just want my son to be safe, healthy and happy. I would be sad for the things I would miss out on in his life, but the truth is, I would be there in his heart. I know he knows how much I love him, because I tell him and show him every day. I wear a bracelet that my son bought me with a quote by Emerson that I have adopted as my personal mantra: “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”