

1st PERSON



From “Why Me?”
to “It Had to Be Me!”

by **Patty Murray**

I was 35 years old and pregnant with my third child when I heard my physician say, “You have breast cancer.”

In the months that followed, I would search for an answer to that primal question—*Why me?* The answer would come, but not until much, much later—two years in fact. It was then that all my experience and the knowledge I gained helped me create the Pregnant with Cancer Network (PWCN), a national not-for-profit organization that offers hope and support to women who are diagnosed with any form of cancer while pregnant. Since its 1997 inception, PWCN has offered peer support to women in the U.S. and 15 other countries, as well as providing information and referral resources.

My journey began in November 1995, when I felt a “golf-ball” sized lump under my armpit. One month later, an ultrasound and needle biopsy confirmed my worst fear—I had cancer. On the way home, I felt shock, anger, and fear. But my tears stopped when I saw my two year old and four year old at home. I didn’t want my children to worry—*mothers must be strong*.

In the whirlwind that ensued—testing to see if the cancer had spread, discussions about whether to continue the pregnancy or abort (would keeping the baby have a negative impact on my survival?), countless consultations—I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. At first, I approached my healing with an independent attitude. But what quickly emerged was that I needed to speak with others who had experienced what I felt. And, I needed to hear survival stories of moms and babies. Thankfully I soon connected with two women in the Buffalo area who were a year out of treatment, feeling great, and each with a perfectly normal baby boy.

I underwent major surgery (while

pregnant) to remove the tumor (5cm, lymph node involvement). Some oncologists staged me at 2B, others at 3. I then had six months of 5FU chemotherapy (four months while pregnant), a C-section (Patrick was born 10 days early, 7lbs., 15oz.), and was immediately thrown into chemically induced menopause accompanied by hot flashes, night sweats, and insomnia. Next I had four more rounds of another type of chemotherapy with Adriamycin. This was followed by five and a half weeks of radiation therapy. (My radiation treatments started the same day as my daughter’s first day of kindergarten. I saw her off on the school bus and dashed to the radiologist’s with my six-month-old baby and three year old in tow.) In the twelve months of my cancer treatment, I learned many lessons—not the least being, while your fears are real, a positive attitude and feeling “connected” are invaluable.

Post-treatment, life went on as “usual” for a while. However, seven months after my treatment ended, I felt as if my whole world was falling apart. I saw a cancer counselor, who diagnosed me as having post traumatic stress syndrome. I had never dealt with the psychological trauma of being blind-sided by cancer. (Statistically, my chances of getting breast cancer at 35 were 1 in 934; and my chances of getting cancer while pregnant were 1 in 1,000). The counselor suggested that I go out and help others. Barely able to function, I didn’t understand how. However, her words turned out to be prophetic.

Two weeks later, I finally met the two women who had shared their stories of survival with me. In September 1997, sitting around a kitchen table, while our toddlers played nearby, the Pregnant with Cancer Network was born. We were committed to providing the same hope that we gained from each other

to women everywhere. My counselor was correct. When my focus shifted away from myself and onto helping others, I began to feel better.

In 2002, the Pregnant with Cancer Network website (www.pregnantwithcancer.org) was expanded to include a detailed database that houses our patients, documents and policies, and a computer program that allows our patient coordinator to match a volunteer support woman with newly diagnosed patients who contact us.

Today, PWCN employs three part-time staff and a certification program for our volunteers has been created. With a talented Board of Directors and Board of Professional Advisors, PWCN produces two to three newsletters each year. When a woman contacts us by phone or through our website, an informational packet is mailed to her. Then, she is connected to a support woman with whom she can communicate by phone or email. All of our services are free of charge. We are a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, and receive donations throughout the year in order to fund our programs. Currently PWCN has about 200 support volunteers, and the Network has helped 500 newly diagnosed women. Each year about 4,000 women in the U.S. are diagnosed with cancer while pregnant. Our vision is to help as many of these women as possible.

Today, I am cancer-free with no recurrence. My son Patrick is a beautiful, healthy, and happy child. And I continue to have a burning passion to help other women walking the path I trod. I no longer ask, “Why me?” The Pregnant with Cancer Network is my answer. ■

Patty Murray is co-founder and chairman of the Board of Directors of the Pregnant with Cancer Network.