

Perspectives From a Cancer Caregiver (For My Mother) and Researcher (For All Mothers)

By Eric Woolf

“ With an uncharacteristic tone she spoke the uncomfortable words, “I received the results from my mammogram and we need to talk.” ”

Beyond the Text Books

I have heard many stories from people who were deeply affected by cancer in some way. These people respectfully make it their life's work to research the disease. My interest in cancer, however, came before my direct experiences with it. I developed a fascination for the complex inner workings of the cell early in my education. As this interest grew, I naturally began to focus on how these inner workings can go awry, as they do in cancer. This led me to pursue an education in cellular biology and eventually a position in a cancer research lab in Phoenix, AZ.

My first experience with cancer, beyond a text book, began while I was attending school in Indiana. I received a call from a good friend back home in Arizona. Her mother, Lorrie, who was like a mother to me, had been told there was a seemingly small mass in her stomach that would need to be removed. I wasn't sure how to react, but her family did not seem overly concerned so I didn't let it bother me. The next evening following the surgery, I received a second call. The once light concern hanging over my head came crashing down like a ton of bricks. The mass was far more diffuse than doctors had thought and Lorrie's entire stomach was removed. As I

boarded the next flight to Arizona, I remember a flurry of emotions and feeling a loss of control, which I'm sure pales in comparison to how Lorrie must have felt.

What followed in the next three years would be an education not found in the classroom or a laboratory. The official diagnosis was gastric adenocarcinoma, a common form of stomach cancer. Following her surgery, Lorrie began standard chemotherapy treatment to attack any tumor cells that the surgeons may have missed. She would undergo this grueling therapy for a little over a year only to find that the cancer had recurred. This would lead to more surgeries followed by both radiation and chemotherapy. After three years from her initial diagnosis, Lorrie lost her incredibly inspiring battle with cancer.

Even Closer to Home

Fast-forward an entire year. I received another life changing phone call, only this time from my mother. With an uncharacteristic tone she spoke the uncomfortable words, “I received the results from my mammogram and we need to talk.” I knew immediately what she needed to tell me and I was shocked. Disbelief is the best way to describe my feelings when my mother told me that she had ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS), an early form of

“They’ve opened my eyes to a better understanding of the disease, not only as a scientific concept but as a deeply human experience that is unique to every individual patient and caregiver. Some have asked me if Lorrie and my mother are the reason why I want to do cancer research. My answer is no. They are the reason I know I have to.”

breast cancer. After my experience with Lorrie, I thought I would be prepared for this kind of news, but it was just as difficult and the ton of bricks crashing down was just as painful.

My mother has always been *my* caregiver, and to see her in such a vulnerable emotional state was difficult. As a researcher, everything I do in the laboratory is controlled and carefully orchestrated. But this was different. She would undergo multiple surgeries, various tests and scans, and doctors would make important decisions that would determine her outcome. I had absolutely no control over these things and I accepted that. So I did what I feel is the most important thing a caregiver can do. I held her hand every step of the way and supported her just as she had supported me.

It was an incredibly strange feeling to be in the oncologist’s office sitting next to my mother talking about surgical resection, lymph node biopsies, hormone receptors, chemotherapy and radiation. These are all phrases I had become all too familiar with in my research. My mom, being a nurse practitioner, has always said, “Nurses and doctors can often make the worst patients. They know too much.” I think the same could be said for cancer researchers. In my head, I found myself conjuring up various journal articles, statistics and other snippets of unsettling information as the doctor discussed my mother’s options. My current research in the laboratory focuses mainly on the most aggressive and malignant forms of cancer, so most of the information I’m immersed in on a daily basis is framed within the grimmest context. This didn’t help my frame of mind. My fears however, were thankfully unwarranted. My mother’s cancer was found at a very early stage giving her the best possible progn-

sis and highlighting the importance of routine mammograms and early detection. This was confirmed in a moment of overwhelming emotion for me when the surgeon, following her first major surgery, came out to the waiting room to inform me, “Everything went great. The lymph nodes were clear and your mother is cancer free.”

Not Just a Project, but a Passion

A lot of my time in the research lab is spent looking at cancer cells under a microscope. Experiments are designed, tests are performed and data is collected in hopes of finding new ways to stop these malignant cells from growing. But what can easily get lost in the daily grind is the fact that many of these cells came from a human being with a specific journey. My personal experiences with cancer provide a daily reminder of this. However sobering these thoughts may be, I am still grateful for the powerful inspiration and motivation they bring. They’ve opened my eyes to a better understanding of the disease, not only as a scientific concept but as a deeply human experience that is unique to every individual patient and caregiver. Some have asked me if Lorrie and my mother are the reason why I want to do cancer research. My answer is no. They are the reason I know I have to.

Eric Woolf is completing his graduate degree in biology at Arizona State University. He studies the role of cancer metabolism in the treatment of malignant brain tumors. His mother, Karen Woolf, is a breast cancer survivor. She tells her story in this same issue of *Cancer InCytes* magazine.