

# Her Story: My Mom Beat Cancer And Then It Came Back

When I was a sophomore in high school, my parents shared some difficult news with my brother and me. My mom was going to have to have a biopsy to test for breast cancer. Truthfully, I remember feeling very calm about it at the time. **This happens to other people, and it doesn't turn out to be cancer. This won't happen to my mom, I thought – it's just a little obstacle.** But as **the days passed and we waited for results, I couldn't get it out of my head.** During that time my brain managed to do a complete 180, and I went from being very confident that nothing was wrong to being quite sure that something terrible was about to happen.

When the day came to find out the results, my parents said that they would let us know right away what was up. I was in math class and found myself drawing line after line down my paper because I was so anxious. Eventually, we got let out for lunch. I got some chips and salsa (a favorite snack) but it tasted like cardboard to me. When I heard my name called to the attendance office, I felt my mouth dry up, and my palms start to sweat. They handed me a note that my parents were there to pick me up. I literally jogged back to my math class to get my things and ran out to the car. We picked my brother up and went home.

My mom had breast cancer. We all cried together as a family and talked about the details and the next step for a long time. But in a beautiful way, we got to a state of peace. We decided to go to a movie together. Sitting there with my family watching a movie at the theater in the middle of the week – feeling closer to them than ever – is one of my happiest memories.

**As many people who've experienced this know, the “next step” with cancer is not pretty.** Cancer felt to me at times like a fifth person in my house, always lurking and waiting for the wrong moment to cause sadness. My mother went through a double mastectomy and then

chemotherapy during the first semester of my junior year. Chemo gave my mom hell day in and day out – disrupting her eating, sleeping, physical ability, and overall quality of life.

**Truthfully, I'm not proud of how I handled myself as a daughter, friend, or person in general during that time. I escaped to a friend's house any time I possibly could. I spent extra time at school when possible, going in early to "work on projects" and avoiding my house in general. Despite the initial closeness my family's situation created, I felt myself putting up emotional walls. Over time, those walls extended not only from my family but to my friends, too, on occasion. In a sad way, I came to resent my family's situation and wished that there were some way to "delete" it so I could go back to a life free of anxiety. Even sadder – I selfishly resented the loss of attention I got from my parents, and I lied to them often to be away from the house.**

**I didn't really "wake up" from this mindset until my mom was joyously declared to be in remission the following spring of my junior year of high school. It felt like waking up suddenly from a bad dream: horror at the realization of what just happened followed by intense relief. The relief was short-lived though... I spent a lot of time self-reflecting on who I had become during my mom's battle, and it made me feel immensely guilty. I made a conscious decision to flip things around: finish high school and do my best to be a better family member and person. We had a very happy summer as a family, celebrating an end to the evil behind us, and I was determined that nothing like that could bring me down again.**

My mom was turning 40 that September, which was the beginning of my senior year. To **commemorate this milestone and the fact that she'd beaten cancer, my family decided to do something truly monumental. We decided to climb Colorado's Quandary Peak together.** My family began training soon after we made this decision. **(I didn't train as much as I should have, turns out!)** In late September, we traveled to Breckenridge, stayed in an awesome cabin with a view of the peak, and went to bed having no clue what we were in for.

We were climbing on that mountain from before sunrise to sundown. It was one of the most **arduous things I've ever done**. The altitude change was brutal, and the first snow had made the rocks we were climbing icy and slippery. After approximately seven hours of climbing, I was ready to give up. The peak was still a 45-minute climb away, and I felt my resolve breaking down. This is an important moment in the story because just when I was ready to give up, my mom surged ahead of the group and pushed us all to the top. She was the first one to get there while we lagged behind. **Afterwards, she would say that she "had to do it" and that she didn't** come all that way (both literally and figuratively) not to prove that she could do it. At the top, she **took a picture holding a sign saying, "I kicked cancer's ass!" with a huge smile on her face**. The scene at the top of the mountain was something that must inspire novels or songs. I will forever **be thankful that my mom's courage and motivation got me there**. This is another one of my happiest memories.

**But as you already know from the title, the lessons I've learned didn't end on that** mountain. After coming home and being back for some time, my mom developed pain in her back. She thought she had pulled something when climbing down the mountain because of the iciness. **Her doctor put her through physical therapy to help it, but after a few months, it wasn't** getting any better. This time, I immediately felt my intuition telling me that the cancer was back. **I think we all did, but we didn't realize what exactly was wrong until February of my senior** year.

My memory of the timeline is fuzzy, but I remember my mom having one of her first back spasms in mid-February. She would clutch her back and wince in pain if she moved certain ways. She had been teaching first-graders, but was having trouble bending over to help them with their work in class. Every day, it got worse and worse. One day, I was in the living room, and I heard her cry out from her room upstairs. I went up there and she had tears in her eyes and was leaning against her bed. I started crying because I could sense it was a turning point.

A few days later, I had a dress rehearsal for my senior play. When I got home my parents were sitting in the living room to give me the news. She had tumors growing on her spine. They were so big that they had broken her vertebrae. Her spine was literally breaking. She had two years to live. **The cancer wasn't fixable.**

There aren't words to describe hearing this kind of news. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't stand. I kept thinking, over and over again, "Why?" Here's another testament to my mother's strength: after I became hysterical my mom was the one holding me and rocking me – not the other way around. **She kept saying, "I'm just so thankful it isn't you or your brother."**

My brain immediately fast-forwarded through the rest of her life and all the things she wouldn't get to do and what would happen to my dad. I also fast-forwarded through important parts of my life: my college graduation, my wedding, when I held my first child. All I could think was that **I didn't want any of them to ever happen to me if she wasn't going to be there.** And here I was, supposedly heading to college at the University of Missouri the next year. **If you'd asked me then, I would've told you flat out that I wasn't going.** It was, and still has been, the worst night of my life.

**But I didn't let this night make me forget the decision I had made after my mom's first bout with cancer.** This time I was going to be there and be mentally present in every moment I could. I can confidently say that while I failed before, this time I stepped up to the plate. My mom had to be in a wheelchair until they could do surgery on her back (and for awhile afterwards). I spent **time helping her when I wasn't at school and helped clean, cook, and do errands around the house.** She hated to be so reliant on others for her needs, but a silver lining was that it came with a lot of good quality family time. After her surgery, she made so much improvement and eventually began walking again. **You would've never guessed what she'd been through if you could've seen her at my high school graduation party.**

Going to college was still incredibly difficult for me, but my mom wouldn't have had it any other way. I tried to Skype with her often, and she continued to do better and better (she even went back to teaching her first grade students). In order to keep myself okay with being away at college, I didn't tell anyone about what I was dealing with my entire first semester except for my boyfriend at the time. This was, in hindsight, a mistake. **If you're going through something, I've learned that being open about it and talking about it with people will make you feel infinitely better. It's so important to have a support system with people you can go to if you need it.**

I learned the value of this lesson the next semester because my family was in for more rough news. The day after I got back to school from winter break, my parents said they needed to Skype me right away. My mom now had tumors in her pelvis – and her brain. My dad said he was coming back to Columbia to pick me up right away. I felt so defeated. **For what wasn't the first time, I felt very angry at how unfair the world is sometimes.** Just when my mom was doing well again, she was hit with another blow. How long did I have left with her? A year? A few months? A few weeks? I had no idea, and it terrified me.

I went home, and we waited on more information from the doctor. Some of my extended family came to stay with us. I think we all were in disbelief at more horrible news despite already having two rounds of it. Even then, my mom was so strong. She allowed herself to be sad at times, but also worked to find moments of happiness and searched for humor in any situation possible.

We began to have conversations about what would happen if she died, something I never **thought I'd** have to do until my old age. **That's how I felt, really** – very old and worn down. I **can't imagine how my mom or my dad must have felt. But then we got some positive news from** her doctor about a treatment that would likely prolong her life for some time, so I reluctantly went back to school.

Luckily, this story doesn't end so bleakly. My mom's "two years to live prognosis" was given to her three years ago, and she is doing well. She has been on many different kinds of treatments that have each prolonged her life and even made it so that she has gone back to teaching yet again. How amazing is that? **I'm a junior now, and it is still very hard for me to be away from her because I've wholeheartedly adopted the viewpoint that "every second counts."** But having her as an incredible role model has made me learn that it's important to always keep living life to your fullest even when it gets hard. Whenever the trivial day-to-day is bringing me down, I try to think of her courage, and it gives me renewed energy.

My relationship with my mom (and my dad and brother) now is so special. I feel like all that **we've been through as a family has brought us closer together than ever, and I cherish all that** she has taught me everyday. **I see God's work through her relentless** spirit, and it erases earlier feelings of anger I had at the unfairness of her situation. There was a time in my life where I **wasn't sure if I would ever stop feeling broken.** Her cancer once left holes in my soul that I am now refilling with happy memories of being with her. I am truly blessed.

I hope this is a reminder that it is an issue that affects women all year, everyday. Supporting the cause all year long brings us closer to finding a cure so that no one has to go through what my mom, or your mom, or your sister, friend, relative, coworker, etc. has gone through. And, if you read this far, please go call your parents and tell them how much you love them! You can never say it too many times.