Don’t Give Up on Yourself

Hello fellow warriors . . . I have kept my journey very much to myself and a few close family members and friends. You see, I tend to absorb other people’s anxieties, worries, concerns – and if there is one weight a cancer patient doesn’t need to carry with everything that they are trying to process themselves – it is the stress of their trusted loved ones.

My journey began earlier in 2024 with a couple of weeks of experiencing intense itching on my hands and feet and what looked to be the beginning of jaundice on my face and eyes. After a checkup with my doctor, resulting in a CT scan that didn’t provide much information to identify the source of the issue, I ended up in the emergency room with a clogged bile duct. Four weeks and three bile duct stent replacements later it was officially confirmed that a mass on the head of my pancreas (approx. 3.3 cm) was the cause of the blocked bile duct. It was confirmed to be cancerous, but doctors were hopeful that it was detected early enough for Whipple surgery.

Unfortunately, further scans/tests were not able to confirm that there was no distant metastasis and doctors decided that I should begin 6 rounds of FOLFIRINOX chemo with the hope of reducing the mass for better probability of cancer removal with surgery. I managed to maintain a healthy weight and was fortunate that the first 6 rounds did not cause much nausea (that came later towards the final 6). I definitely had my downtime dealing with fatigue and that pesky neuropathy (mainly due to the oxaliplatin in the chemo), but thankfully it helped reduce the size of the mass and allowed me to move forward with surgery.

Surgery (albeit scary) was honestly not as bad as I imagined. I was moving around (though slowly) in two weeks and focused on trying to give my body the fuel it needed with the new "plumbing" to get back on the remaining 6 chemo infusions. (Coincidentally, November 21st, 2024 will be my final (12th) round of chemo.) The next conversation will be with radiology since the surgery was able to exhibit that one lymph node was detected to have tested positive for cancer. Ultimately, the goal is to be given a "status" of being in full remission and long-term, cancer free.

So here is my takeaway – and I truly hope it helps anyone reading this – I knew, the minute the word "cancer" was mentioned, that **time was of the essence**. I could not have moved as fast as I did with tests, diagnosis and treatment had I not advocated so much for myself – and had the fortune of my sister and friends doing so for me as well. If I hadn't admitted myself into the emergency room early on, knowing something just wasn't right, my only option would have been to "take a number" and wait.

Cancer doesn't wait, nor should you. But **you must stick to your guns – be persistent and if you are overwhelmed (and you will be) ask for HELP**! Ask a family member or close friend to be your second set of ears and an advocate for you too. My bullheaded persistence allowed me to get released by the gastroenterology surgeon quick enough after my 3rd stent replacement to have my sister help me make the 3-hour trip to the nearest facility that could schedule me for port placement in order to start chemo the following week. For the duration of these chemo treatments, I did my best to nourish my body, rest and still try to push myself activity-wise for the sake of normalcy.

Don't give up on yourself! Don't give up on your loved ones either! Our bodies are wonderful, miraculous machines and you need to have faith in your body and not quit on it. I will tell you that there are not many positive stories out there – but I believe there are lots of success stories that go untold and the reason we don’t get to see those stories is because those warriors are busy living. I pray that we are very close to a successful solution, not just to cure, but to proactively assess the possibility of pancreatic cancer early on.

I realize that very little is known of this aggressive killer and the information that is out there can be daunting and discouraging for new and long-term patients. I believe that we need to not only shed light on how much more common this disease has become, but will give hope to fellow warriors, their family and friends, especially as new information is discovered for the treatment and cure.

Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month is my Milestone

I was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer in May of 2021. I was initially given six months to a year to live. My tumor is wrapped around the superior mesenteric artery, in the uncinate process of the pancreas. I have had 8 rounds of SBRT radiation, and 5 rounds of cyber knife radiation. Between the two, a portion of the tumor was removed. I have refused Chemotherapy infusion, opting instead for the oral Chemotherapy drug Xeloda. I was on Xeloda for 2 years but made the decision to stop taking it altogether because my feet and hands were cracked open and bleeding, and I had sores inside my mouth.

When I was first diagnosed, my mind worked overtime to try and grasp the fact that I was dying. I cried buckets of tears and had a million thoughts run through my mind. I am a grandma of 7 grandchildren, 4 boys and 3 girls. I was so looking forward to watching each one graduate high school, and I wanted to dance at each of their weddings! I looked forward to holding my great grandbabies in my arms. My husband, Dan and I had plans for his retirement that we looked forward to. Plans to go back to Scotland again and see more of my grandmother's ancestral home. Plans to do more hiking and camping in the remote wilderness of Alaska, where I was born and raised. So many plans, hopes and dreams that pancreatic cancer stole from me.

I kept asking myself, "Why me? How can I possibly cope with all I stood to lose and never accomplish? I felt overwhelmed with grief, and sorrow, and fear over saying my final goodbyes to my husband, our three sons and their families. I felt myself giving in, and giving up to cancer.

And then, I called upon my faith, my hope and my trust in God. I placed my life and my future is God's hands. I made the decision to speak positively about my cancer, and to live every minute of every day to the fullest. I stopped focusing on the 'what if's' of tomorrow. Nobody knows what tomorrow will bring. Instead, I live in the moment, giving thanks for every breath I take, for the joy and laughter my family and friends bring me. I look for ways to encourage others who have been diagnosed with cancer.

Today, I am three years and six months past my initial diagnosis of inoperable pancreatic cancer. I live for the day, focusing my time and energy on the positive aspects of my life. I have no idea how much longer I have on this Earth, but today I am alive and doing well, and that is sufficient for me. Pancreatic cancer does NOT define me but rather, I define IT!

November is Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month and helps me draw attention to this deadly disease, and to get others to check if they have symptoms, early detection is so important! Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month is my milestone; I have survived 3 years of Novembers. This November I want to encourage everyone to keep your focus on the positive aspects of your life. Be thankful for each breath you take, and do not let cancer define who you are!

YOU ARE BRAVE! YOU ARE STRONG! YOU ARE A CANCER WARRIOR!

Julie Shares Her Journey and Hopes to Inspire Others

I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer by chance by my local internist. I had a “tummy ache” which was very unusual for me, so I had to check it out. I minimized it, but my internist said, “I know your body, I’m going to run a few tests.” I was 67 and had just finished my first sprint triathlon only 6 weeks prior. Throughout my life I had been around 10 to 30 pounds overweight but at that time I was in the best shape of my life.

My doctor called me the same day to come to his office and I was given THE News: “You have pancreatic cancer. I’ll try to get you into surgery as soon as I can.” By chance the surgery schedule was filled and I had about a week to worry and call everyone I knew who might be able to help, support and inform me about what to do. The same name came up several times: Dr. Isacoff at UCLA. I made an appointment and trusted him and what at that time was a unique protocol: a low-dose, long-term unique chemo cocktail. Since I lived in Santa Barbara, I had friends drive me to UCLA where I had a chemo infusion for at least an hour, then an appointment with Dr. Isacoff, then met my friend for lunch and was driven back to Santa Barbara. Sometimes I took the train. I had 3 weeks of varied chemo with one week off for 8 months.

People ask, “How bad was it?” It was 18 years ago and life since then has been so good that my memory fades about many of the challenges. The first few days of chemo were insignificant, then it took hold and I felt “yucky” for about two days, came out of it for about a day, then spent two days feeling pretty good, then back for another infusion week. The fourth week without chemo seemed somewhat normal.

During the 8 months of chemo I lost my hair and I lost my appetite –that was a surprise for someone who often over-loved food. I didn’t have a taste for anything raw which surprised my salad loving self. I had a couple of serious dips when I was taken to the hospital oozing from every orifice. There were nights when I was so wired I couldn’t sleep and wrote love letters to family and friends. AND, I also went on ski trips with my family, continued to work from home, drove where I needed to go, went out to dinner, went to church and temple, celebrated holidays and just ***lived life.*** I even had an *actual* witch doctor who was a Harvard & Stanford trained MD. Mostly I did ***everything.*** I desperately wanted to **live** and knew that I ***had to*** *do everything* in **MY** power to support the work the doctors were doing.

My motto was “leave no stone unturned." I thought, if there is a possibility it could help, if it has helped someone else, I’ll do it! There was a monthly support group for pancreatic cancer patients and their families at the **Cancer Support Center in LA**. I didn’t miss a meeting and my family also went to the meetings. There was a **Cancer Support week long** workshop I attended with my family who called it “Cancer Camp.” I worked with a nutritionist who taught me to juice and make smoothies. I bought cancer cookbooks. I hired a weekly cook. I had a friend bring me flowers every week. I had weekly massage and acupuncture. I did daily meditation and listened to meditation and cancer healing tapes. I especially listened to healing tapes while getting chemo. Then, I joined a gym that had a Cancer Program with both information and physical exercise. I was faithful in working out as best I could three times a week. I saw a Chinese doctor and used Chinese herbs daily. I exercised and walked daily and ate healthy as much as I could. I did everything the doctor told me to do, and everything meditative and spiritual my heart and hospice* counselor suggested. Hospice was especially supportive on an emotional level.

After the 8 months of chemo, Dr. Isacoff suggested Dr. Charles Yeo as my surgeon. At that time he was at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. He is currently at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia. I had a Whipple surgery in 2005 and no further treatment. As usual with the Whipple surgery there were complications that were handled appropriately by the doctor and hospital. I was there for 4 weeks. I walked the halls every day holding my pole of medicine bottles with tubes and needles going into my body.

In the lobby of the hospital there was a piano. My then-spouse said that the minute he knew I was going to be ok was when he began to play the piano and while he was playing I began to dance with the pole and dangling bottles.

A few years later, there was concern about breast cancer. I had a lumpectomy in 2007 which showed DCIS but no cancer and all subsequent exams show no cancer.

I continue to reach out and tell my story to anyone who is willing to listen. And I can only hope that my story inspires and brings hope to others. It is crucial that we raise awareness, spread information and stories. We need to provide support and more stories about survivors, to give hope to those dealing with this diagnosis. I tell everyone who is interested about my story because there IS hope and there ARE angels. I have lived to see both of my children married, and seen 3 grandchildren born and being raised. I have travelled and lived to enjoy the life and love of my family and many friends. I continue to work out either swimming, walking, or playing Pickleball nearly every day and am engaged in many civic, entertainment, cultural and religious organizations. As of now, 2022, I have been cancer-free for 18 glorious years, I can only thank heaven and all the Angels along the way.

*“Hospice” and “palliative care” have be used interchangeably. Palliative care is now the norm for symptom management when diagnosed with cancer. Learn more about palliative care

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Judith Celebrates her Cancer Recovery at the LA Cancer Challenge

A celebration of my first-place gold medal win at the LA Cancer Challenge on October 23, 2022. For those who have been sharing my 2-year Pancreatic cancer recovery, I wanted to share this exciting news.

I was invited to enter the 5K Run/Walk at UCLA, but my first inclination was to say, "I’m not sure. I’m not much of a large crowd person and I have run/walked alone these last 3 years of COVID and my cancer recovery."

In reality, I was a little afraid of the unknown. I had never entered a 5K in my life.

The next day, *my spirit* nudged me to change my mind. "Why not accept this opportunity for a *new adventure*, a *chance to grow*? And this would give you the opportunity to *honor your own body* – which endured a distal pancreatectomy (removing 40% of your pancreas, all of your spleen, and 8 lymph nodes) at UCLA on October 23, 2020, 2 years to the date of the LA Cancer Challenge.”

So, I entered the race and thoroughly enjoyed mixing with all the other people supporting the pancreatic cancer community – survivors, family members, teams dedicated to someone who died of pancreatic cancer, babies in strollers, young children, teen, adults of every age and ethnicity – donating their time and money to support the Hirshberg Foundation for Pancreatic Cancer Research’s mission to **find a cure for pancreatic cancer**!

The event raised over $520,000!!!! And over $10 million has been raised since the inception of the Annual LA Cancer Challenge 25 years ago by Jon Hirshberg, who lost his father Ron to pancreatic cancer.

One of the highlights of the day was a 5-minute hug with a fellow survivor, 8-years cancer-free, who had bravely undergone multiple surgeries and multiple rounds of chemotherapy. He was trembling at first, but his body was finally able to relax and we both cried and breathed deeply together. It was very moving!

The fact that I won a First-Place Gold Medal for the fastest time in my age category was a total surprise to me and "icing on the cake."

I am grateful that I said "Yes" to the invitation and the challenge. I was blessed beyond measure. I send blessings to cancer patients and their families all over the world and encourage you to ***have faith, fight like a warrior, and know that you are loved and valuable***!

"Your individual spirit is your most powerful weapon in the battle with cancer." ~ Judith Anne

Connect with Judith

Jay Channels His Journey and Luck into Support for Others

My cancer story begins at the end of December 2012 when I was back East at my best friend’s father’s house. Growing up I spent a lot of time in that house. I went to the bathroom and was reminiscing about when the little bathroom was put in, being nostalgic, thinking I was lucky to have such a long history with a friend and a house. I was shocked to look down and see that my urine was very dark. I was concerned, it was so dark I called my primary care doctor in California and left a message to get an appointment.

By the next morning I had an email with an appointment for the following day.

Midway through the exam, the doctor told me I had to see a gastroenterologist immediately and that I needed a CT-scan that was scheduled for the next day. I saw the gastroenterologist the Saturday before Christmas. He confirmed the diagnosis was pancreatic cancer. He recommended surgery and told me there was only one doctor to perform the surgery, Dr. Howard Reber at

UCLA. I was so lucky that my tumor was resectable, that the tumor was blocking the bile duct, making a diagnosis easier. I had a Whipple procedure on January 4th 2013. I was lucky.

I started Chemo with Dr. Isacoff about 10 weeks later. I did 6 months of folfirinox and showed no evidence of disease (NED) for 3 or 4 months. Then my CA19-9 went up. Then I got Gem/Abraxane for 4 months and again got to NED. Six months went by and I had the port removed. Then the CA19-9 went up again. Another port was put in, back on chemo again.

Then I heard about a new procedure whereby they isolate circulating cancer cells in your blood and perform genetic testing. The procedure was so new that the doctor didn’t know how or if it would help. We got the test results. I remember the exact words he said, "we can work with this!" He immediately changed my chemo to Gleevec. I was heartened and excited until the pharmacy called and said the cost of the drug was more than $10,000 per month. I was plunged into uncertainty again, I didn’t know what would happen. Then I got a call from the pharmacy. They told me they found a Prescription Assistance Plan to cover my out of pocket costs. I started taking Gleevec and rapidly proceeded to show no evidence of disease (NED) and have been NED for 5 years. I was lucky.

It has taken awhile to get past all the chemo but I’ll cherish every drop, because it got me to the liquid biopsy and then to where I am now. For the last couple of years I have been lucky to be on the Patient Council of the Canopy Cancer Collective. The Canopy is a group of 14 hospitals that have a Multi-Discipline Center for Pancreatic Cancer. UCLA is a member as well as Johns Hopkins, Stanford, Mass General, UCSD, UCSF & UC Davis to name a few. With the other patients and caregivers in the Canopy Patient Council we have started a peer-to-peer support group that meets monthly to create a community for people fighting this disease. Our group, AnCan (Answer Cancer Foundation) is about people helping people through inclusive virtual peer support that allows for widespread participation, especially to those geographically, physically or socially disadvantaged.

Pancreatic Cancer Awareness month is a time for reflection for me. It is a time for me to show gratitude and thanks-giving for the many personal milestones I have been able to share with my family over these 9+ years. I have been so lucky to celebrate births, b'nai mitzvahs, graduations, theater productions, marriages, science fairs, birthdays, bike rides, I am so lucky to have time.

Esther Lee Shares Her Pancreatic Cancer Journey

We are delighted to have Esther Lee, DPT, as our Honorary Starter for the 2021 LA Cancer Challenge Walk/Run. The LACC Honorary Starter is a special honor we bestow each year on a pancreatic cancer survivor who has shown great courage, strength and positivity throughout their cancer journey.

Diagnosed in July 2020 with stage IV pancreatic neuroendocrine tumor with metastasis, Esther faced a long and bumpy treatment journey that she is still on. Through it all she exemplifies grace and expresses gratitude every step of the way. In Esther's own words, "I've truly learned to take it one day at a time, the greatest challenge being fully present in each day, moment by moment… this is the amazing place of peace and gratitude.”

Learn more about Esther in this short video

Esther is a source of joy and inspiration to everyone she meets, including her long-time client Serena Williams. The tennis icon and Esther’s dear friend shared a heartfelt video rallying support for Esther and her team.

Watch Serena’s video

Esther has the amazing support of her family, friends and her medical team at UCLA. On October 31, 2021, we rally for Esther and all those facing pancreatic cancer to walk for research, race towards a cure and never give up!