



Interview Transcript: Beatrice

Beatrice lives in Kugluktuk, Nunavut. Until recently Beatrice worked for the Nunavut Government.

Type of Cancer: Breast

Year of Diagnosis: 2008

Treatment: Partial mastectomy, followed by 16 rounds of radiation in Edmonton

Date of Interview: October 2010

Introduction in Inuktituk.

I was diagnosed in 2008, in May. I got a phone call and that's when the dance started. The whole journey for breast cancer, I was done my surgery, my radiation treatments, on June 11, 2009. To this day, I still continue to have check-ups with my surgeon general in Yellowknife, and I finished my last check-up with my oncologist in July of 2009. And that's when I was diagnosed cancer-free, so that was the most amazing blessed news I ever received.

Talking about my diagnosis

I'm a very private person. The first person I told was my husband and then I thought, "Oh my god, I've got to tell my children." I told my husband, "You have to tell my children for me, let them know. And let them know," I said, "it's not a death sentence, this is treatable." So he said, "OK." So I got him to tell the children but I told my husband first. I reminded him not to tell anyone, that I would tell people and let them know.

But I said, basically, I want only our family to know. A woman is defined today by her looks and what they have or don't have and that was never very important to me, but suddenly, after I found out I had breast cancer and they removed the whole breast, and how would people look at me, it really, really affected me. I must tell you that in my mind I made a big thing out of it. I kept thinking, "How are people going to look at me and what are they saying and what are they going to tell me?" And one by one people came to the house and I told them right away, "If you're going to come in here to feel sorry for me, or to cry, don't do that." I said, "I need to fight this; this is one battle I have to do alone." It's a lonely battle. It's a battle I have to do, no one else. I asked them to be positive and to pray for me. I said "That's how you can help me, but if you're going to be negative and not give me good energy, stay away from me." So that's what I decided to do right away.

Living in the North

When you're first diagnosed you're immediately told by your doctor what to expect and you'll be heading down to—in my case, in the Western Arctic, it's the Cross Cancer Clinic in Edmonton.

So he prepared me that way. Of course, I live in Kugluktuk and we have to travel from Kugluktuk to Yellowknife, overnight in Yellowknife, then fly on to Edmonton the next day. The travel alone, it's long, you're already worried about, gee, you know, what's going to happen to me, do people know that I'm going down for this. And I know I shut down a bit, I kind of enclosed myself and I stopped looking at people and made sure I was noticed as little as possible. I didn't want any attention on me.

The next day we are told to go to Cross Cancer by taxi and so we did. It's a good thing I know Edmonton but for the people that don't know Edmonton or don't know what to expect, make sure you ask a lot of questions when you're first diagnosed. I also had support from one of my cousins who had breast cancer and I would phone her and I would ask her what do I expect, what do I need to do, how would I feel, what did you feel? What kind of questions could I ask, would I sound stupid? And she would say, "No no, just don't be scared, don't be scared."

A partial mastectomy

They hadn't wheeled me to my room yet. I told my sister, I said, "Sis, come look at it, I need to know what's left." She said, "No, just leave it." I said, "Come on, help me." I said I couldn't use my right arm. So she helped me to lift the blanket but I still had my gown, and I was still kind of covered and it was all kind of bandaged. And she said, "Let's leave it for later, don't worry about it," and I said, "OK," but I was kind of groggy. But it stayed in my head: what will I look like? I never—all my grown years I never worried about what I looked like as a young woman, as a girl. And here I was suddenly, worried about what I looked like. And that was so strange to me. It was a new thing. I think at that point I finally realized that I am a woman. My background from residential school, 14 years, and also sexual abuse and going through that, cancer of the breast and then the surgery, it all came back. All those feelings of being violated and no say in the matter, all came back. I didn't want it to but it all came back. So I felt violated. I felt that I had no control over my body, my issues, so that's why I felt that way. And then I realized, yes, I am a woman.

Advice

I tell people that, make sure you have a good escort so that escort can understand and translate and also be able to ask questions that you might not think of. Write them down. So for me, I do understand English, I do understand Inuinnaqtun, but even when I got down there, I couldn't understand, in medical terms, so I asked my doctors and the nurses, "Please speak to me in plain English, and just tell me, don't sugar coat it, don't make it sound all flowery, because it's not. I need to know and I need to know how, will the cancer spread when I'm done, is it spreading now, is it there, tell me." So I said, "Just be honest with me, I can take it."

And yes, you do have to ask lots of questions, you do have to make sure that when you are in the hotel or if you are going to be in the boarding home, if the hotels are full, make sure you get picked up and brought to your appointments and that you don't get lost. If you do get lost, I tell all of these people, before I had the cancer, because I used to be a medical escort for family members, I always told them to make sure you ask people directions, cab drivers. That's how you learn.

My approach

The more knowledge you have about what you are going through, about breast cancer, your outcome of taking it in, adjusting it, chewing it up, swearing at it and getting it out, is the best

thing you can do for yourself. And that's what I did. I made sure I had all the information I could. I adjusted, I got angry over it, cry at it, swear at it, do all the things that I needed to do to make me well, in my heart over there, not behind me, because all that I already went through is done, all my radiation is gone, it's finished. Part of it's still in my body, it still affects me today, it changed me, but it didn't change my mind and my heart to drive to live, to have the hope. I really believe that the more support and knowledge you have for yourself, in the end will benefit you and your family because cancer is a family illness. It's not just a person, it is the family. All the way from your husband, your parents, if they're alive, your extended family, your grandchildren, everyone, no matter how old, is affected.