



### Interview Transcript: Sara W.

Sara is an artist and an artist's model.

Type of Cancer: Non-Hodgkin's B-cell Lymphoma

Age at Diagnosis: 22

Year of Diagnosis: 2000

Treatment: Chemotherapy and Radiation Therapy

Date of Interview: August 2009

You kind of fit a role when you're a patient. You're given great care and you're put into a system and you have lots of books to read and no one expects you to go to work and everyone is basically being as supportive as they can be, and understanding, and giving knowledge. And you have also just the regimen: you have to be able to wake up for that certain drug and you have to be able to eat that day and be able to get a good night's sleep. So you have kind of a to-do list that's made for you. And then suddenly, you don't have those drugs to be taking anymore and you don't have those symptoms to deal with any more but you're still not feeling the way you were before you had cancer. And that's the big challenge. How do you build your new life?

My name is Sarah Witalis and I'm 29 years old. I was diagnosed at 22 with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma B-cell, Stage 4.

When I was brought to the oncology department at Sunnybrook, I understood right there already that it was most likely a cancer that they were looking for. So, really, I just wanted to find out what kind. So I know it sounds dramatic but it was actually not very climactic for me to find out what kind it was because at that point, that was the one I was hoping for, not something worse. They found out there was a high success factor in treatment with chemotherapy and I took that for six months and finished it with a month of radiation five days a week.

#### **The chemo**

I was slightly prepared because I've had a lot of cancer in my family, but it was as dramatic as they made it sound. I was hoping it wouldn't be. But I remember now the three days after the treatment was the most brutal and it became very routine for me just to stay in bed for the three days. There was a lot of nausea and a lot of restless sleep. But, the symptoms for the chemo were actually much easier than the symptoms from the tumour itself. So I found it a bit of a relief; it was cathartic almost. It was like a bad flu.

Believe it or not, you do get used to the chemo. After a couple of months, it starts to subside, many of the strongest reactions to it, so the nausea starts to get under control. Of course, it's

also treating your cancer and so the cancer symptoms are starting to subside and you're just really more fatigued. The radiation is what knocks you off your feet. I think they leave it until the end in order—for my case, they left it to the end in order to ensure that the treatment would be most effective and to kind of keep the tumour from being able to ever grow back. I found that there were no outward symptoms from getting the radiation. It was afterwards. It just takes the energy right out of your body, it really does. And that's when the nurses say, "It's going to take a few months to recover from the radiation." And I found it took a long time, maybe a year.

### **A dumb tumour**

I was given some visualizations by the doctors. One of them was that it was the size of a grapefruit. I think that was just so I could really understand how it was impacting my chest. I could imagine putting a grapefruit right there in your chest. But they also said it was dumb, it was a dumb tumour. That was because it was so fast growing. And they were able to see that it grew so fast, it wasn't able to adapt, so as long as they were able to attack it fast and harshly, then the tumour would not be able to adapt to the treatment. And then I used that info and I thought about it as being a dumb slug—my body... that was melted away like butter. You could imagine just slowly over time, you get this drug and it's burning up your veins and I would just imagine it melting away the layers and layers of this grape-fruit-sized tumour until it was the size of a pinball, and then it was the size of a thumbtack, until it was the size of just a cell. And then I... after treatment I dealt with imagining that it was gone entirely.

So it's a way of being able to focus the body on the task that it needs to handle. It doesn't need to worry about the nausea. It needs to worry about eliminating that tumour. And the mind needs to be able to focus because it's such an anxious time. It's a very stressful time in your life and you don't need to be worrying about the other things around your house, you don't need to be worrying about your job, you just need to focus yourself on healing.

### **How I changed**

On a practical level, cancer changed me in many dramatic ways. I haven't been able to keep a job very steadily because I just don't have the energy to be able to maintain the schedule that the average employer for my age group expects. I can't do a 9to5 job now. Socially, it really impacted me because I felt like during the years 22 to 24/25, I was almost slipped back into being a teenager because I wasn't able to accomplish the lifestyle of someone of that age, of their early 20s. So, psychologically, it changes the way you're developing, wherever you're at at that time. It's going to kind of put you on hold a bit.

You're going to find yourself not being able to relate to your friends. Some of them couldn't talk to me and I understand why. I understand that they just didn't know what to say or what to do. But things start to fall away that don't need to be in your life. And you look back and wonder what it would have been like if they had still been a part of your life or if those certain things that you were doing at that time would still be part of your life. It's like a big turning point, one that you didn't have any choices in. That's something that you do have to deal with. And of course that touches on how you react.

### **Inner strength**

There's definitely that inner strength thing that happens when you are facing an illness. It

resides somewhere behind the heart, in between the spine and the spleen. It's just this thing that you don't even know is there in your everyday life. And then when it comes down to it, it comes down to you. You look in the mirror and you realize that really, you're the one that's sick, you're the one that's going to have to pull it together. And it does, because it's there, it's something that we all have. And that little inner self, that little voice, is the one that's not going to let anything happen lying down. And that's what gets louder and louder and louder as you fight it and fight it and fight it.

And so it was really reinforcing for me to see that happen. I, of course, didn't expect that. I've read about it. You just don't... you don't think that's going to be you. You think, "Oh, I'm just strong, I'm a strong person," or, "I'm really intelligent." Or all of these things that you assume about yourself and you never really realize who you are until something like this happens.

### **If I had to do it all over again...**

It's hard to look back and tell yourself, "Oh I wish I had done this or I wish I had done that." Instead, I like to say, "No regrets." Because you do what you have to do and sometimes it's not the right choices and sometimes you start learning about the consequences of them and you do think, "Oh if I'd have done this maybe it wouldn't have come out that way." But I think it's very dangerous for me at this point to look back and have a wish list of what I could have done otherwise. Because something that you still work with even at this point is that it's been emotionally draining. And so it's easier for me to get depressed and I look back and realize, "You know what, I handled it like a human being," and that I need to be proud of the fact that I handled it at all.

I think that being really outspoken to your doctors is important, so every time maybe that I had kept my mouth shut, maybe I could have opened it up and maybe got an answer faster. But ultimately, I think everything went as well as I could have hoped, really. I'm considered in the cure zone now because it's been five years since treatment so I can't really complain.