



Interview Transcript: Tracy

Tracy works in the health unit at the Assembly of First Nations in Ottawa. She is married with two children.

Type of Cancer: Breast

Age at Diagnosis: 40

Year of Diagnosis: 2006

Treatment: Bilateral mastectomy, Chemotherapy, Radiation, Hysterectomy and Breast Reconstruction

Date of Interview: July 2009

My name is Tracy Tarnowski. I live in Embrun, Ontario, just outside of Ottawa. I am 43 years old and I was diagnosed with breast cancer in August 2006, the year I turned 40. The treatment that I went through for the breast cancer began with chemotherapy, which I did for about seven months. From there I went to have a bilateral mastectomy and that was followed by radiation treatments, and from there a hysterectomy and then on to reconstruction surgery. So the whole process began in August 2006 and basically just finished in October 2008.

Coping

I worked for a couple of weeks after the diagnosis and then I stopped working, and I stayed off work until I was done everything. I found it very difficult to slow down, going from a busy life and being very active to being at home and doing nothing. And a lot of the doing nothing was because I couldn't do anything. I remember thinking, "Wow, a few weeks ago I could run an hour and now I can't walk upstairs in my house without sitting down twice." But I kind of had this mantra in my head, that it's not forever, it's just for now. And every day I kept repeating that. "It's not forever, it's just for now." And if I tried to be as positive as I could, and just one day at a time, that helped a lot.

Spreading the news

I got to the point where I just decided I wanted to tell as many people as I could because I didn't want to have to pick up the phone all the time and repeat myself on the treatments and how I was feeling, and I also didn't want people to feel obligated to phone me. Sometimes people don't know what to say; they don't know how to treat you. They just feel nervous and maybe they would just completely ignore you because of that fact, so I thought, "Well, what I'm going to do is I'm going to tell everyone I can."

So I started sending out updates by email. I just made a big mailing list and I did emails probably weekly for the first little while and then after each treatment. And it sort of gives people an out, too, so they know what's going on if they want to write me back or they do want to pick up the phone. I sort of left it up to them. And I also wanted everybody to feel

comfortable. I didn't want anybody around me to feel uncomfortable, so I made a point of telling as many people as I could.

Telling the kids

In the first days after the diagnosis, the hardest part in that was telling the kids. And being able to explain to our kids without scaring them but without also telling untruths. We wanted to be sure that what they were hearing was just what they needed to hear. Not too much, not too little. And I told them to ask me whatever you want to ask me and I'll be as honest as I can. So they were very mature about it. Sometimes I think they didn't quite get the depth of how bad things could have been. And I also did a lot of acting—you know, I acted like I felt better than I actually did when they were around. And I would try to be as upbeat as possible and sometimes, as soon as they were in bed, I would just collapse because that was draining, just acting like I was OK, acting like I was better than I was really feeling at the time.

On being bald

Once I started going through the chemotherapy, knowing that I was going to lose all my hair, which I didn't think was going to bother me so much—until it happens. It is quite a shock to see yourself with no hair and for others to see you, so I spent a lot of time trying to make other people feel comfortable. That was hard but once I was able to be more public about it, it made it easier for me and for everyone around me to feel comfortable. Because I never did wear a wig. I bought some and I never wore them. I just felt better just being myself. One time that I will never forget was when I first went out in public with absolutely no hair. And I was going to the arena to watch a hockey game and I had my hand on the door to the arena to pull it open and I just froze like that. And my daughter, who was only seven at the time, put her hand on mine and she said, "Mom, it's OK, you look like a rock star, you can do it." And we went in and from then on it was OK.

The hard parts

There were a lot of difficult parts of the journey. There were all the physical things, to the point where I couldn't get out of bed. I was in bed for a few days at a time. And in pain and just feeling generally really crappy, but again, I knew it wouldn't be forever. But some of those days were pretty long and for my kids to see me like that... I did end up in the hospital for one week because when my blood counts were down to 0.0—my neutrophils. So I was in the hospital for a week in isolation, and that was difficult because I was there by myself, knowing that the kids were at home with Mike and knowing that their mom was in the hospital. That was really scary for them.

But other things that were—maybe you wouldn't think would be hard, but just being able to let other people do things for me. And because I've always been a very independent person—so for people to bring... whether it was bringing food over to the house or offering to help, to actually accept help and just say thank you without feeling like you had to reciprocate. It maybe sounds odd, but I found that hard to get used to, to just accept those things. And also to let things go, that I couldn't do everything, I couldn't be at every hockey game watching the kids, I couldn't be at school functions, I couldn't be everywhere all the time. I tried to do as much as I could, but sometimes I just had to accept the fact that I was going to miss out on those things. But missing out on them then was going to give me a lot more years in the long run. So it's hard to pinpoint the most difficult thing because on so many levels, if it's emotional or physical, there were a lot of hard things.

My work

I started working in the First Nations community because I have my status as a First Nations citizen. I never grew up on the reserve, I grew up in Sudbury, Ontario, but after I finished school I just kind of gravitated towards Aboriginal organizations. I work at the Assembly of First Nations in Ottawa and I'm currently working in the health unit and my file that I have is the cancer file. I thought at first it might be difficult to work on cancer issues having had cancer, but I find it is the complete opposite. I find that if there's anything that I can do from my experience as a patient voice or a cancer survivor, that might shed some light on a situation, that might help other people. Whatever I can contribute, I'd like to do that.

Talking about cancer

A lot of First Nations people don't want to talk about cancer. They feel, you know, talking about it might be inviting it in. And if they're residential school survivors, there's a lot of difficult issues that they're dealing with, especially when it comes to cancers that may be in very private places of their body. They just don't want to deal with that; they don't want to go there. And so when they are diagnosed, it is at a later stage. They're not getting the screening and all those preventative measures and so by the time it actually gets diagnosed, a lot of times it's too late to do anything. So, I'm hoping to just sort of raise the profile of that with the screening and healthy lifestyle choices and that sort of thing to ensure that they can reduce future cases as best we can.

No fear

I think it's changed me in that I don't feel stressed out about really anything now because— you know, I asked my daughter this question one time. I said, "How do you think that this has changed me? Do you think that Mommy is different since I've had cancer?" And she said, "I think that you're really strong but I think you're stronger now and I don't think you have any fear. I don't think anything scares you now." And I said, "You know, I feel like that: nothing really scares me." In some situations where I might have been nervous or shy or I didn't want to speak up, it doesn't matter to me anymore. Some of those little things, I just let them go. And one thing I would never—I hear people say "my" cancer. What was "your" cancer? It wasn't "my" cancer, it was "a" cancer. I didn't ask for this, I didn't invite it in, it wasn't mine. It just was there, so, and now it's gone.