



# Lemons

to

# Lemonade

*Surviving Breast Cancer – local heroines  
tell their inspiring stories*

**By Lisa Love Harris**

**D**uring this time emotions are juggled while well-meaning friends and families help in sometimes good, sometimes not so good ways. Disappointment in the mutiny of a once healthy body covers like hot fudge on vanilla ice cream. Tears fall without warning or reason at the checkout line in the grocery store or while hugging your child. Finally, the enemy is identified. It's location pinpointed and marked. Your wonderful, brave doctors become your primary defense as the cancer is removed and your healing, and re-creation begin.

Somewhere in this insanity, there is hope. Women you've never met begin to drop by and call. They are your "survivor sisters" who have also battled and are sometimes continuing the battle with breast cancer. They know what you're going through. They've been on this ride before and prepare you for the surprise twists and turns ahead. One stops by unannounced. You've only seen her around and don't know her well. She hugs you warmly and tells you, "It's going to be all right. It doesn't feel like you will ever be 'normal' again, but you will. You will be even better." You look at this kind-hearted woman as if she has lost her ever-loving mind. But the intensity of her determined eyes, and her graceful smile tell you she is very serious. "You have been blessed by breast cancer," she says. "You are a survivor now. You're strong and you can do this."

And like a miracle you feel the strength, the power, the grace and the motivation it will take to take charge and begin your battle. Your journey with breast cancer has begun.

Unfortunately, this scenario or one like it plays out thousands of times each day across the United States. McKinney too, has more than its fair share of people fighting breast cancer. Lynn Canavan, M.D. is former chief of staff and a surgeon at Medical Center of McKinney. It was Dr. Canavan's suggestion that this story be written, to tell the stories of diagnosis, treatment and recovery. Since she began her practice in McKinney 10 years ago, she has treated hundreds of women and men for breast cancer. In fact, many breast cancer survivors are diagnosed, have surgery and are treated by an increasing number of general practitioners, oncologists, surgeons and nurses right here in McKinney.

This story follows the journeys of eight brave women who are McKinney breast cancer survivors. Each has found blessings

*I*t begins with a touch, a feeling,  
an intuition. The ride begins.

*Seat belt on. Safety bar in place. The Texas Twister and Texas Giant rolled into one. The journey with breast cancer seldom begins without a jolt. The "suspicious mammogram" soon follows. The ascent drives higher. Then the biopsy confirms your worst fear . . . cancer. BREAST CANCER. The ride dives wildly going down, down, down at a speed and force, causing your roller-coaster emotions to collide dangerously into one another. Stomach dropping. Queasiness. Difficulty sleeping, resting, smiling. Unease settles like a heavy winter coat on a hot Texas day. Then the ride begins its next crazy ascent. Scans, tests, pokes, prods – being certain of what the enemy cancer is and where it has begun the invasion. Surgery. A few minutes grown to hours in the operating room and a determination of the cancer's stage. How much has it invaded? This determination defines the treatment of this hellish disease for each patient.*

through her breast cancer experience. The indomitable spirit of each woman demonstrates her courage and tenacity to fight cancer, and the myriad of other roadblocks, which often hinder recovery. Since cancer knows no income level, professional background, race or culture this group of women includes an elementary school counselor, a business executive, an engineer, a nurse, a nature education specialist, a credit representative, a paralegal student and a co-owner of a Hill Country bed and breakfast. These women's stories demonstrate the vast differences in the staging of breast cancer, surgery options, treatment and recovery happening everyday across our nation.

Most of all, these inspiring stories reflect how each life was blessed instead of cursed by breast cancer, and how through each experience these women have been able to help others in McKinney faced with the same ticket for the breast cancer ride.

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### Jane Hancock

A beloved Valley Creek elementary teacher turned counselor, Jane Hancock discovered she had Stage II breast cancer six years ago in her early 50s. Her 2.5-centimeter tumor was found on a routine mammogram. The first surgeon recommended a full mastectomy and removal of her lymph nodes. She decided to see Dr. Canavan for a second opinion. "Dr. Canavan tried to preserve as much of the breast as possible. She was aggressive, yet patient. She is very conservative in her approach to the body, doing as little damage as possible," Jane said. "The mission was accomplished with a lumpectomy and removal of several lymph nodes." Following her surgeries, Jane's follow-up included four rounds of chemotherapy and 33 radiation treatments.

She remembers spending the first evening after her diagnosis sitting in the dark thinking and praying. "I found myself unable to ask the question, 'Why me?' The longer I thought about it, the more I thought, 'Why not me?' I am no more special or unique than anyone here or anywhere.

"This is the lesson cancer teaches you. You may not be able to take cancer away, or insure it won't return, but you can choose how you will live with it," Jane said. "You've got today. Attitude is everything. When faced with cancer, you have to deal with it and move forward.

"The vainest thing you'll go through is losing your hair during chemo treatment. That somehow becomes quite freeing. You get past that," she said. Due to her professional role with young children, Jane wore a wig. Most of the children never knew she had cancer. Her chemo treatments ended in December, yet she continued wearing the wig until a good amount of hair grew back. Three months later, following Spring Break, she recalls visiting each classroom and telling the children, "Six hundred kids are going to see me with very little hair tomorrow. I need your help – please don't make fun of me. The next day, the kids were just precious," said Jane. "One fifth grade girl walked by me, stopped and said, 'Mrs. Hancock, I like it! I REALLY like it!'"

Jane's warm and honest approach in reaching out to others is to bring comfort to them, spreading encouragement to ease their fears. Today, Jane continues to participate in fund-raisers for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation as well as the McKinney Chapter of the American Cancer Society. Her life's journey has included 30 wonderful years teaching and counseling elementary children. She has been at Valley Creek since it's beginning, but plans to retire this year and begin new adventures.

### Lisa Stewart

It was another busy day at work for 34-year-old Lisa Stewart, senior vice president of global operations for Software Spectrum, a two and a half billion-dollar software company. Her company was sponsoring a health fair that Monday in May 1997 and although she was quite young, she had had a sharp pain in her left breast. She made herself an appointment to have a mammogram at the Fair. However, her company was in the midst of a major acquisition and when the time came, having a mammogram seemed the least important thing. "I remember asking my assistant, Cyd, to cancel my appointment because I didn't think I had time. Cyd told me, 'I had one this morning and it doesn't take very long,' . . . to this day I call her my angel."

A few days later, on Wednesday, Lisa recalls checking her voicemail and hearing, "This is the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. Please call us back immediately. You have a spot on your mammogram that requires further evaluation."

The words were shocking to her. Having lost her mother to a brain aneurysm when she was 12 and her father to pancreatic cancer when she was 17, Lisa immediately feared the worst and knew she didn't want her daughter to lose a parent too.

Her husband met her at the Dallas office of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation where they were taken into a room. After a more thorough "spot mammogram," she was told she needed to find a surgeon immediately because the results were highly suspicious for breast cancer. She called her OB/GYN from a pay phone and they told her they could "fax her a list of surgeons."

That wasn't fast enough for her so, like a dream, Lisa recalls somehow getting in her car, driving to McKinney from Dallas and ending up at her trusted family physician, Dr. Billy Boring, Jr. She walked up to his receptionist's window and told them she had no appointment but needed to see Dr. Boring immediately. He examined her and her mammograms and explained the reasons the area appeared so "suspicious." He told her to get dressed because she was going to see a friend of his. In his office a few minutes later, Dr. Lynn Canavan's concerned voice came over the speakerphone. Lisa asked them both, "Don't I need to go to MD Anderson?" Dr. Boring's firm, but gentle reply eased her fears, "Lisa, I'm telling you Lynn is the best. I trusted her to treat my own mother, so no; you don't need to go to Houston. You need to see Lynn. She is going to meet you in her McKinney office now."

Lisa was impressed that this surgeon she'd never met, would come to her McKinney office from her Frisco office on a late Friday afternoon before Memorial Day weekend. "Dr. Canavan did a needle biopsy right then and there. By the characteristic of the tissue, she was even more suspicious of breast cancer.

My husband and I got the news that indeed it was cancer, and in her very special way, Lynn began to broach the topic of mastectomy vs. lumpectomy. Given the small size of the tumor and the success rates of lumpectomy with radiation, she strongly urged me to consider a lumpectomy, Lisa said.

All she could think about was how she ended up with breast cancer. She had no family history. She was obsessed with exercise and an avid runner. She did not smoke or drink and was not overweight. She remembers asking Dr. Canavan, "What did I do to get breast cancer?" Dr. Canavan calmly told her, "You didn't 'do' anything. It's an ugly disease that simply doesn't discriminate."

The lumpectomy went well and the nodes taken showed no sign of cancer. She had six weeks of radiation, and then began dis-

cussing other preventative therapies with her oncologist, Dr. Robert Kirby. Given the characteristics of the tumor, statistically she didn't "need" chemotherapy. However, "statistically speaking, I shouldn't have had cancer in the first place," Lisa said. After lots of research, discussion and debate it all came down to one thing – "I had to be able to look my husband and daughter in the eye and say I did everything I could to beat this thing." Following six rounds of what was considered a less aggressive recipe of chemotherapy, Lisa had good days and some really bad ones too.

When chemo was complete, Lisa once again needed to be "doing smart things to avoid a recurrence." She read about Tamoxifen, an estrogen blocker that had proven effective in postmenopausal women, and was beginning to be used to prevent breast cancer in those high-risk, pre-menopausal patients. Lisa suggested to her physicians she take it too, and did so for five years.

Lisa is often called upon by Dr. Canavan to counsel other women diagnosed with breast cancer. "It's the good that comes out of something so bad – when you can completely empathize and truly relate to the shock and fear, and help women understand that cancer doesn't have to be a death sentence any longer. Breast cancer has actually been a blessing," Lisa said. "The blessing of this experience is the different set of eyes I have been given to 'see' things I never actually 'saw' before."

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### *Iman El-Mikawi*

Still deep within the sadness of a miscarriage, Iman El-Mikawi felt a huge lump in her right breast seven years ago. She was 37 years old at the time. Her OB/GYN prescribed an antibiotic thinking it was an infection in her milk ducts. After a week, it was still there. She was referred to a diagnostic center for a biopsy, and was told she had a cancerous tumor. The mother of 18-month-old, Amina, Iman worried she would be unable to care for her baby, so she called her parents in the middle of the night their time in Cairo, Egypt. Her mother, a professor of biochemistry, contacted the university where she worked and told them she was taking a yearlong sabbatical. They left the next day for McKinney to assist their daughter through her cancer experience. "My mom and dad were there for me and I cannot say enough about them and what they did for me during that difficult time," Iman said.

She recalls a "whirlwind of exams and appointments." Her OB/GYN recommended Dr. Canavan and Dr. Monte Jones. She was told, "You must take charge of your disease. Question everything. Research everything." Since she, her husband and mother were scientists by trade, the quest for knowledge began. It was determined, based on her scans; the tumor was a Stage III. She remembers being told she had a 25 percent chance of surviving the first five years following her diagnosis. That statistic made her mad. How dare her life be put in terms of percentages!

Her sentinel node surgery indicated one cancerous node in her neck. Since the cancer had escaped the breast area and affected the lymph nodes in her neck, her status was changed to Stage IV. Chemotherapy was recommended to shrink the tumor before it could be removed. Following two rounds, the tumor resisted shrinking. Her husband, Ashraf, discovered a combination of chemo drugs on the Internet that he thought might better shrink the tumor. Dr. Jones agreed and she began treatment immediately. Due to the intensity of the treatment, she had to go to the hospital for three days every three weeks for each infusion. The tumor began to shrink and Dr. Canavan was able to perform the mastectomy and

remove all of Iman's lymph nodes. Following surgery, more high dose chemo was required. However, stem cell treatment was determined to be her best bet to be rid of cancer. In March 1999 she went into the hospital for three weeks of stem cell treatment.

Although she lost her hair three different times and had a lot of difficult days, Iman is thankful for a supportive family and wonderful friends. Her employer also gave her time off and welcomed her back following her recovery. "My family was my main motivation to getting well. I knew I needed to get my daughter to adulthood," Iman said.

Today, seven years later, Iman beat her 25 percent chance of survival for the first five years and is 100 percent alive and cancer free.

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### *Lee Ann Williams*

Lee Ann Williams' routine mammogram didn't catch anything unusual in August 1998. So her breast cancer diagnosis a few weeks later was a big surprise. When she noticed a moveable pinto bean sized lump in her breast she thought it was from her breast implants and made an appointment to see her plastic surgeon. He recommended she find a surgeon, have it surgically removed and biopsied.

Lee Ann knew Dr. Canavan from St. Gabriel's Catholic Church and arranged for her to do the surgery. "When Dr. Canavan did the biopsy surgery the last thing I thought of was cancer," Lee Ann said. She remembers waking up in her hospital room and Dr. Canavan telling her, "I have bad news. You have breast cancer."

"I immediately thought I was terminal. I was in shock. However, Dr. Canavan assured me she would be with me every step of the way. She called and had someone bring in some literature. She wanted to do another surgery to check my lymph nodes. She took seven nodes, but none showed any cancer," Lee Ann said.

Three more surgeries followed, including one to remove the silicone implants which hardened due to calcification and radiation, and replace them with saline ones. "The cancer had literally grown against the silicone implants," she said. "After being told I had breast cancer, I began thinking about my children, Natalee and Trenten. Would I see them grow up?"

During her chemo treatments, she became part of a study to experiment with a new combination of drugs. Most breast cancer patients receive Adriamycin and Cytoxan, but Lee Ann had four rounds of Cytoxan and Taxotere. She has recently been contacted and told that this study is in the completion stage and ready to be presented to others in the field of oncology.

One of the blessings for Lee Ann came during treatment. "I don't exactly know if it was a calling from God, but I received such good care at the Cancer Center, I decided to go back to school and become a nurse too." Lee Ann recalls finishing chemo treatments in December and beginning classes at Collin County Community College the following January while she was continuing radiation treatments. "For my identification photo I was asked to remove my hat. It was one that a friend had given me that said, 'Bad Hair Day.' I was totally bald beneath it. I said, 'no.' I won," Lee Ann said.

Love and support from family and friends helped Lee Ann get through the darkest days of treatment and recovery. In May 2004 Lee Ann graduated from Texas Woman's University and currently works as a Registered Nurse at Presbyterian Hospital of Plano in

Pediatrics. She began her graduate work for a Master's of Science in Nursing at TWU last year.

"I feel like I'm a better person because of my experience with breast cancer. I view life differently and know if I can go through that, I can go through anything. I value the time with my family and friends even more," Lee Ann said.

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### *Michelle Dudas Stewart*

In March 1998 Michelle Dudas was 40 years old and six months pregnant with her only child when she discovered a lump in her breast. The pain was incredible, but nothing appeared on her mammogram or sonogram. Her OB/GYN, Bruce Rajala, thought it was probably an inflamed mammary gland but referred her to surgeons, John White and Lynn Canavan. Removal of the lump indicated that it was cancer and additional surgery was going to be needed. It was decided Michele would begin receiving steroid injections to "boost" her baby's lungs in case the next surgery induced an early labor. In the event that the baby was not born during the second surgery, the steroid injections would allow labor to be induced a few weeks before the actual due date so Michele could begin cancer treatment. A more radical lumpectomy and lymph-node dissection were performed: one positive lymph node was detected and her "margins," or areas of tissue surrounding the tumor, were "clean."

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The night before her second surgery, Michele, who began a journal for her unborn child when she found out she was pregnant, wrote, "If you want to be born tomorrow, you just go right ahead! We can deal with that." Instead, baby Spencer was born a few days later on May 10, 1998, a healthy Mother's Day baby. A week after the birth of her son, Michele started chemotherapy. When her hair began falling out, her husband, Joe, shaved his head in a show of support. One of their early family photos shows Michele, Spencer and Joe, all smiling, sporting their bald heads.

As incredible as it sounds, that was just the beginning of Michelle's courageous, bold fight with cancer. A year later she felt a lump in the exact same place as the cancer had appeared before. Her doctors assured her it was scar tissue. However, Dr. Rajala wasn't as certain. A needle biopsy determined the very aggressive cancer had returned to the same location despite clean margins, chemo and radiation. Michele planned a bilateral mastectomy with Dr. Canavan.

"All I had to do was look into Spencer's eyes or hear him say 'Mommy' to know I was doing the best thing for us," she said. "It's not that it's a simple decision to have a mastectomy. I was devastated at first."

She recalls an office visit when, feeling frightened and angry at having cancer again, Dr. Canavan got nose-to-nose with her and said, "You are NOT going to die from this!" It's exactly what she needed to hear. "When I would begin to feel overwhelming anxiety I would remember Dr. Lynn getting right in my face. I still hang on

to those words. Having a surgeon who has an emotional tie with you can make all the difference in the treatment process," she said. "A team of doctors who are positive and truly believe you can live past cancer is tremendously valuable."

Michele also has an incredible family support system. Her husband comes from a very large family. "I wondered what I was going to do with all those in-laws," Michele said with a smile. "We recruited them to come to Texas while I was doing chemo. We couldn't have made it without them!"

A naturalist and educator at the Heard Natural Science Museum and Wildlife Sanctuary, Michelle loves her job. "Having cancer has made me stronger, more focused," Michele explains. "My cancer experiences made me reevaluate my life. I had to discover just what it is I want my life to mean. When I close my eyes for the last time am I going to be thinking about how much money I made or what model of car I drive? I hope not! Hopefully, my impact on the lives of others and the Earth will be what concerns me.

"I've learned that it is not only extremely important to me to be alive to raise my son; what I leave behind for future generations is also of the utmost importance. I hope that I can communicate information and create passion for things that are outdoors away from malls, televisions and computers. I want to inspire people to really care about the natural world so that they begin to take care of it. We're only getting one chance to get it right, you know? When I look into the faces of the kids I teach at the museum I know I'm doing the right thing with my life."

Today, Michele continues her fight as a new, unrelated cancer was diagnosed two years ago. During this cancer Michele imagines Carol Burnett's cartoon character, the cleaning lady, mopping away her cancer. "You have to find humor in all of this whenever you can," she said.

"Although I'm dealing with it again, I'd like folks to know that you do not have to give up if you receive a diagnosis of cancer! Never give up! You can live, really live and stay alive although you have cancer," Michele said. "It isn't easy. Often it's not accomplished with much style or grace. Sometimes you find yourself just going through the motions and hoping for the best. It's painful and frightening. However, getting through it can be done! Find those things that give you comfort; surround yourself with people who are uplifting and positive. I realize that I'm especially fortunate to have a wonderful family and awesome friends. I wish I could loan them all out to the other cancer patients. I get to experience working with the amazing people at the Heard Museum. They nurture me and provide unending support without allowing me to curl up and wallow in self-pity.

"I pray. God can speak to you in the subtlest of ways. You just have to pay attention," she said. "I go outside and sit under the trees. I can hear God, loud and clear, in the songs of the birds."

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### *Natalie Sawyer*

A busy mom with two children and a full time job, Natalie Sawyer spotted a lump in her breast in October 2003. She didn't think too much about it though because her mammogram had been normal the previous February. However, six months later she stepped out of the shower and her husband asked her what that lump in her breast was.

"Something's not right," he told her. She immediately called her OB/GYN, Dr. Ralph Joseph, at home. He told her he would

see her the following morning. At her appointment, he told her, "I wish you would have come in a few months ago." He called Dr. Canavan and arranged for Natalie to go to her office immediately. Although she remembers shedding a tear or two in Dr. Joseph's office, in the few miles from Allen Presbyterian Hospital to Dr. Canavan's office at Medical Center of McKinney, Natalie got herself into 'fight mode.' "I had to fight the cancer because of my husband of 17 years and my children," Natalie said.

At Dr. Canavan's office the dimpled skin on her breast hinted at the results of the needle biopsy. "I already decided I had two priorities; to get rid of my breast cancer and raise my children," Natalie said. Dr. Canavan told me, "If you keep this up, you'll get through anything."

"She gave me my options: have a lumpectomy, have my right breast removed or have a bilateral mastectomy. I decided I wanted to be rid of breast cancer and not give it another chance to come back. I opted for the bilateral mastectomy. Her surgery on April 9, 2004 determined her breast cancer was a Stage III with no lymph node involvement. Dr. Patty Young worked with Dr. Canavan the day of surgery to begin reconstruction.

Weak from six rounds of chemotherapy, Natalie recalls waking from a nap one afternoon so thirsty and tired, she crawled to the refrigerator. She lay on the floor and spoke to God. "I haven't come this far for this, I told Him. I asked God to find some way to use me and my experience," she said. "I immediately felt a new strength and purpose. I forgot I was thirsty and walked back to bed. The next day I met Patti, a woman I had never met before, in Dr. Monte Jones' office," Natalie said. "She was just diagnosed and was scared. I told her I had had breast cancer too, and I had just finished chemo and she was impressed. She saw my wig and thought it was my real hair. We became close friends. I even attended her wedding last July."

"The biggest thing I learned from having breast cancer is to enjoy life everyday because you never know what is going to happen to you," Natalie said.

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### Jacquie Sicotte

A Canadian native, Jacquie Sicotte has lived in McKinney for the past 11 years. Little did she know at the time she moved to their new home in 1999 that her next-door neighbor would very possibly become her lifesaver too. In 2002, Jacquie went to Plano Women's Diagnostic Center for her regular mammogram. It was suspicious. She mentioned this to her neighbor and friend whom she knew to be a trusted surgeon. Dr. Canavan told her, "If they want you to have a biopsy, I want to do it." The day of her needle biopsy, Dr. Canavan decided to biopsy an adjacent less suspicious area. The first area of concern came back benign. The second returned positive for cancer.

"It was fate for having moved there in 1999. To have Lynn as my neighbor and friend is a blessing," Jacquie said. "She is a great doctor and the staff at the hospital were fantastic." Jacquie was surrounded by love and support from her husband, Luc, two sons, Patrick and Martin, and her sister, Michelle, who traveled from Canada to be with her. A wonderful network of friends were also by her side throughout her breast cancer experience.

Following her lumpectomy, Jacquie had radiation. Although most people are fatigued by this treatment, she exercised after each radiation session.

In 2005, she participated in a grueling 20 miles-per-day "Breast Cancer 3-Day" in 100 degree plus heat. Her team, the "McKinney Milers," raised more than \$20,000. She raised more than \$6,000 by herself. Now calling themselves the "Blister Sisters," her teammates wore pink boas as they neared the finish line. Unfortunately, Jacquie ended up dehydrated and needing to go to the hospital five miles before the finish line.

"It was by far, the hardest thing I have done," she said. "I made some great friends though. You become part of a special team of ladies – breast cancer survivors. This disease has devastated so many lives but there is so much hope out there."

Jacquie continues to participate in numerous local fund raising efforts for cancer research and cures. In addition, she has returned to college and is working toward a paralegal certificate.

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### Patty Boles

Big plans were in place for Patty Boles last year. After 30 years of teaching elementary school in McKinney, her hometown, she, her mother, Ren Veigel, and sister, Sandy Walthall, were set to begin a new adventure in the Hill Country of central Texas. However, there was a snag. In February 2005, at her mother's going away party, Patty was increasingly concerned about a suspicious mammogram she had a couple of days before.

A follow-up letter from the McKinney Women's Diagnostic Center recommended Patty come back for a second set of mammograms. She was shown a small area of clustered, abnormal microscopic cancerous calcifications. Dr. Canavan performed a biopsy of the area, which came back positive for cancer. On March 7, 2005 Patty underwent a lumpectomy surgery. However, the margins came back "bad." A second surgery was performed a week later with better results.

Dr. Canavan told Patty she might be a good candidate for a newly approved type of radiation. Rather than spend weeks going to radiation, the new technique required treatment twice a day for five days. A small balloon pinpointed the exact location of the radiation, sparing the rest of the breast tissue from harmful scarring. Patty traveled to Medical City Hospital in Dallas for 15-minute morning and 15-minute afternoon radiation sessions

Back at Glen Oaks Elementary School students, faculty and parents prayed for Patty and supported her. As the Glen Oaks' team captain for the 2005 American Cancer Society's Relay for Life, Patty traded in her team's blue t-shirt for a survivor's purple one.

Today, Patty is enjoying her new career as co-owner of Hideaway Hill Bed and Breakfast in Red Rock, TX. She walks through the countryside each morning and thanks God for the blessings he has given her. ■

*About the author: Lisa Love Harris is a freelance writer who has lived with her family in McKinney's historic neighborhood for the past 13 years.*

February 2006 – Healthy Lifestyles

# McKinney

## LIVING

Compliments of the McKinney Chamber of Commerce



## MY OWN STORY – Lisa Love Harris



Lisa with “tiny” hair following chemotherapy.

“There are two areas of concern on your mammogram,” the radiologist at McKinney’s Women’s Diagnostic Center told me calmly. She pointed to a raisin sized mass on the outer edge of my right breast, “Here, and here,” she pointed to a cluster of white

dots that appeared to be little outstretched hands. “You’ll need to see Dr. Canavan for a biopsy of these two areas. Do you have any questions?”

All at once I had a million questions yet, I shook my head, “No.” Since I was only 39, I did not think it was possible to get breast cancer. I knew very little about it except that my father’s mom and sister had had it. My grandmother had been a 30-year survivor and my aunt died from hers. Since it was on my dad’s side of the family I wasn’t worried. I’d heard you could only get it if you were postmenopausal or had a maternal family history. Frankly, I had spent my adult life avoiding anything to do with breast cancer. I didn’t want to believe microscopic outstretched hands and a mass smaller than a raisin could possibly be breast cancer.

A couple of days later, Dr. Canavan performed a needle biopsy of the tumor and core biopsy of the calcifications. Her manner was professional, comforting and thorough. She had been my surgeon for five years before my breast cancer diagnosis. I trusted her opinion and valued her knowledge.

On March 11, 2003 she told me the bad news. I had breast cancer. The first lumpectomy proved no cancer had spread into the lymph nodes but the margins came back “bad,” indicating the cancer was still present. A second lumpectomy was performed. Again, the margins were “bad.” By this time, I had reckoned with the fact my right breast was full of cancer and would have to be removed. The surgery had to wait until an infection in my left breast cleared up. Although many women begin reconstruction during the mastectomy surgery, I could not due to risking new infection. My oncologist, Dr. Monte Jones, had more bad news. The tumor, though small, was very aggressive and would have to be

treated with four rounds of chemotherapy, further postponing reconstruction.

When the day came for my mastectomy I felt no sadness. I never thought of it as losing a breast. Instead, I was happy to get rid of the cancer. Following the surgery there was good news; finally, my margins were “clean.” Needless to say, the summer of 2003 was one spent with only one breast, three tiny hairs on the top of my bald head and a lot of soul-searching.

Following my last chemotherapy I was fortunate enough to begin the process of reconstruction. It took almost two years and three reconstructive surgeries, but I’m physically better than before. I do Jazzercise four-six times a week, eat much healthier and am often asked in a shy whisper, “which side did you have cancer on?” It is a great compliment to my doctors and a remarkable answer to prayers.

Today, I’m celebrating three years of survival. During my Stage I breast cancer journey I’ve had a total of seven surgeries and four chemo treatments. All of my cancer-related surgeries were done here in McKinney as are my follow up visits. I do not live in fear. However, I’m aware reoccurrence is always possible.

My blessings have come in many forms. My best girlfriends threw me a hat party that rivaled any wedding or baby shower I’ve ever had (or been to). That day, more than 60 wonderful friends showered me with hats, scarves and things to make me smile as I prepared for chemo. (Since then, the hats and scarves have been passed on to the North Texas Cancer Center.) During my surgeries and recovery I was surrounded by the love and support of wonderful family and friends. (Not to mention the “healing power” of homemade chicken and noodles, chocolate cake and a smorgasbord of other great comfort food.)

I’m very thankful to my family, especially my husband, Shaun, and children, Will and Emily. My parents were very helpful too, as were my extended family at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. A part of the wonderful sisterhood of survivors, I continue to participate in benefits raising funds for cancer cures and research. Others who continue their courageous battle with cancer every second of each day are in my daily thoughts and prayers. Hopefully, there will be a day when cancer will become a distant memory for us all.