



My connection to cancer goes back to the day I was born. While my mother was giving birth, my father was visiting with his father in the same hospital who had just received a cancer diagnosis. A story I heard over and over growing up was how shocked my grandfather was when he picked up the phone and heard – “Congratulations Mr. Moriarity, you are the proud father of a baby girl!”. You see my father was one of 13 children, so that was the last thing my grandfather wanted to hear. Unfortunately my grandfather, John Moriarity, died six months later, so I never had a chance to get to know him.

By the time I reached my teens, my family had lost many family members to cancer. I will always remember my first real experience with cancer. I was 14 when my dear Aunt Patsy was diagnosed with lung cancer. Yes, she was a smoker, but at that time who wasn't. My parents and their siblings didn't get bombarded with facts and literature showing them how dangerous smoking was. Unfortunately no laws existed to protect children from purchasing cigarettes so it was so easy for them to get hooked. I remember her losing her hair, feeling sick and being so brave, and then my father struggling to deal with the loss when she was gone. He was never the same after Aunt Patsy passed on.

By the time I reached my 30's, I lost several more uncles to cancer, all on my Dad's side of the family. In my mind they were older, and I was lulled into the fantasy that cancer was an “old person's” disease. That myth was soon shattered with a vengeance. On my 30th birthday, some friends and I rented a limousine to celebrate.

While driving around, my best friend Janice complained that her back was hurting. She had just given birth to her second child just two months before, so figured it must have something to do with that. We managed to have a good time, but I could see that she was in pain. She promised to go to a doctor.

A few days later I received a call from Janice while she was on the way to Thomas Jefferson Hospital. You see, the X-ray showed a shadow of something. This something had actually broken a bone in her back. I could not imagine what could break someone's back and assumed she had to have taken a fall. She sounded worried, so I told her I would meet her down at the hospital. By the time I arrived, she was scheduled for surgery to repair her back. A few hours later that surgery was cancelled. Then her one eyelid began to close and doctors from Wills Eye were coming in and out examining her. Not much was said, but you could just feel the change in the room, that something was not good.

By the next day, she was diagnosed with lymphoma and a day later they found a tumor in her sinus cavity. She was to start chemo and radiation immediately. I took off work so I could be with her for her first treatments. I would read Cosmo to her, pretending we were on the beach instead of in a hospital.

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She was discharged within the week and arrangements were made for outpatient treatments.

Upon discharge, we were told what the ACS could do for Janice. We went to an ACS support group, as well as a session that showed us how to use makeup and how to tie a scarf on her soon to be balding head. The support group helped Janice as she could discuss what she was going through with others who were facing the same thing. I could see how much that meant to her. She never said why me, but said why not me? She intended to fight, and fight she did. She tried to make things easier for everyone around her and I tried to keep her laughing. She needed someone to be strong for her as she needed to be strong for everyone else. I needed and wanted to be that person for her. Against odds, she had a short remission and we celebrated. We had a few months to feel almost normal again, however, a few months later the cancer was back.

Janice passed away 15 months after her first diagnosis. No one knew what to say. The situation was just too sad. She left behind a three-year-old daughter and 18-month-old son, parents, husband and siblings. How do you comfort her parents or her best friend?

I remember going home to my townhouse after the funeral. The first thing I would do when arriving at home was to check the answering machine. When I looked I noticed no light was on and realized I would never come home to a message from my best friend. You see, Janice would call me every day without fail and leave some sort of message. Sometimes just to say hi and hope you had a nice day. I dropped to my knees and let the tears finally fall. That is when Reno, my German Shepherd crawled up to me and put her head on my lap and licked the tears. I hugged her for what seemed like hours. She was able to give me the comfort that I would not let others give.

During Janice's battle with cancer I developed panic attacks. Feelings of panic would take over while driving, working or in crowded places. I was put on medication which did not really help. What helped was having Reno with me, because I never had a panic attack when she was by my side. As time went by my panic attacks subsided, but Reno's job was not yet over.

Three years ago my father was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The diagnosis took months to determine exactly what type of cancer he had. By the time of the diagnosis, there was nothing that could be done. We took him home and spent as much time together as we could. I would drive down after work and bring one of my German Shepherds with me. Libby seemed to understand that my father was not well and needed her. She would sit directly in front of him while he was resting on the couch and he would intertwine his fingers through her fur and collar and pet her for hours. She gave my father peace when he needed it most. I can still picture it in my mind, Libby sitting majestic and proud and my father resting comfortably stroking her fur, a reprieve from fear and pain, at least

for a little while. My father passed away 3 weeks after diagnosis of a brain tumor. His loss has really affected my family and me especially. Again Reno was there by my side to help me get thru my grief. The comfort that Reno provided to me kept me from giving up. I truly gained courage and strength from her. Although the pain does not go away, Reno somehow made it manageable.

Two and half years after losing my father to brain cancer, my mother was diagnosed with a brain stem tumor. We were told there is nothing that can be done and have brought her home with hospice care. Again, my family and I struggle to come to terms with a cancer diagnosis and lives are changed so we can help all get through. Again I see my dogs sitting with her, laying their heads on her and I see it bring peace. Libby seems to have that something special when it comes to cancer patients. She will jump up on the couch when my mom is watching TV and then slowly get closer and lay her head in her lap. My mom will sit there stroking Libby's fur while talking to her. My mother shares her food with them and gets a kick out of it when they form a circle around her waiting for her to give them a morsel. They have adjusted to nurses, hospice aids and visitors constantly in and out of the house. They quietly greet all who enter and keep a close eye on what they are doing to their Nana. They have realized that their role as watch dog has now been changed to care giver and they have excelled in their new roles. My mother has exceeded expectations in her quality of life, and I truly believe the dogs play a key role in her success, not to mention what they give back to me.

Reno isn't with me this time to help. She died in her sleep 2 years ago from a sinus tumor. Again outliving expectations provided by her vet by years. I believe Reno stayed around long enough to determine that I was ok after my father's death. I believe that she is waiting for me at Rainbow Bridge keeping Janice and my father company and will be there to greet me when it is my time.

I guess it is no surprise why I Relay. I had my first experience walking for my sister in law's team in 2000 and was completely blown away during the luminary ceremony. I formed Team DSM a year later and never looked back. 2 years ago, I walked with Molly in the first ever ACS dog walk – and now spend most of my spare time thinking up fun things we can do with our dogs while raising money for such a wonderful cause.

Cancer has changed me. Pieces of my heart have gone with the many loved ones that I have lost along the way. What is left in its place is a determination to see an end to cancer in my lifetime. I intend to celebrate the lives of Aunt Patsy, Janice and my Dad. I intend to **Remember** the wonderful times I have had with them and I intend to **Fight Back** by contributing what I can to our relay.

*Cheryl Moriarity*