

Marcia W. Miranda

My Journey.....So Far

The view from my rearview mirror is sometimes hazy; and at the same time, clear as the day I'm currently living.

"It" started over a year ago. My husband and I had just moved the first of August; and I moved furniture, unpacked large boxes; and reached for things on high shelves that I shouldn't have.

Suffering from back pain is not new to me, so I didn't think much about it. Just the degenerative disc disease acting up again. So, off I go to my orthopedist; and as I suspected, he prescribed muscle relaxers and physical therapy. Didn't touch the back pain. Went through the drill of changing meds, different physical therapy exercises. No relief.

By then it was November and the doctors were baffled. Chatham Orthopedics ordered an MRI of the lumbar spine without contrast on November 6. After receiving the results, they were sent to Dr. Dmitri Sofianos, who discovered a lesion on the nerve root of the spine and a large complex within the posterior pelvis. He recommended an MRI with IV contrast.

The clock was ticking, and we were no closer to determining what the mass was or where it originated. November 24, I had the MRI of the lumbar spine, with and without contrast for the lumbar lesion. Results were phoned in to the doctor, and I was directed to return for a pelvic ultrasound – transabdominal and transvaginal and a CT of the abdomen and pelvis with and without contrast. I asked for and received copies of the reports; and reading these words: "8 cm complex right adnexal mass concerning for ovarian malignancy" left no doubt in mind after all this time. I received a phone call from Dr. Sofianos' office to get in touch with my primary care physician as soon as possible....no other details. Frantic, I called my primary care physician and left several messages, with no return call.

Taking the bull by the horns, I was in my primary care physician's office as soon as they opened the next day. I was told the doctor had no openings; and I said I would wait. Not long afterward, I was called back. The doctor reviewed my reports, not using the word cancer. I asked him directly if it was cancer and he said yes, that it appeared that it was ovarian cancer and he referred me to Dr. James Burke, Gynecological Oncologist. I think I was in a trance or some other condition where I was walking through the motions, hearing the words; but not yet realizing that it was actually me living this nightmare.

On December 2, I met with Dr. Burke; and he confirmed that he had to remove the mass via hysterectomy. If cancer, it would be graded and staged; and a treatment plan developed after that. Dr. Burke uses the DaVinci Robotics at Memorial Hospital for surgery, lessening blood loss, trauma and recovery time. He explained an overnight stay in the hospital stay would be required; and asked when I wanted to get this done. I replied as soon as possible. He asked, "How about tomorrow?" So, it was good that I really didn't have time to worry or think about what I was in for. It was a whirlwind, prepping for the surgery and getting everything all squared away at work.

Surgery was uneventful—fairly easy. Dr. Burke came by with his report; and it was good, but not great. Cirrus cell carcinoma, Stage 1A, because it was contained in the one ovary; but Grade 3, because of the aggressive type of cancer. As preventive measure, Dr. Burke ordered a chemotherapy regimen of six treatments, three weeks apart. Needless to say, my Christmas consisted of recovery, worry and being apprehensive about the chemo, having seen my mother go through chemo several times in her battle with lymphoma. Somewhere along the way, Dr. Burke ordered a genetic test, CA-125, which is a marker for ovarian cancer; and it was slightly elevated prior to my surgery. Anything above 35 is increased. Currently mine is at 6.

At my post-op with Dr. Burke, he advised that he had sent my biopsies to John Hopkins, which confirmed that I had clear cell carcinoma, not cirrus cell carcinoma. Six of one, half a dozen of the other—still aggressive, still ovarian cancer. His office referred me to Summit Cancer Care at the Anderson Cancer Center, Dr. Christopher Habermann. But I get ahead of myself. First, I had to have my port, through which the chemotherapy would be administered, surgically installed. That was scheduled on January 8, with Dr. Kristin Nelson. Easy-peezy. I talked to the staff the entire duration of the procedure. Didn't hurt; just uncomfortable. Still have the port and will have it for two years following the date of my last surgery (5/31/18!)

Oh, and by the way, I still had the spinal lesion to deal with. After my first post-op with Dr. Burke, I made an appointment with Dr. Roy Baker, of the Neurological Institute of Savannah and Center for Spine. Dr. Baker ordered , I think an MRI, and said not to worry about the lesion for now and we would monitor it.

OK, so now we're in for the real deal....chemotherapy. I was getting HUGE doses of Carboplatin and Taxol every three weeks, for six treatments. I'll try to sum it up, rather than go through every treatment (although I did keep records of symptoms experienced each time). Nausea was minimal. Constipation was horrible; and I do mean horrible. Fatigue and lack of appetite really bad. Tastes change almost immediately; and I still can't drink my standard glass of red wine. My hair came out within two weeks, as predicted by Dr. Burke (insurance did not cover my wig, even though I had a prescription). Blood counts were all over the place. Oh, and did I mention I was trying to work when I could during chemo? About half way in I started getting rashes the afternoon of/day after them. Told me to take Benadryl. I could

time when the symptoms would start. Chemo on Thursday. Fine on Friday, then about noon on Saturday, symptoms would start. Full-on body aches, like a flu you've never experienced before. Could hardly make it from my bedroom to the living room. Nerves jumping all over. One morning I got up, dressed for work; and my hands were "drawing"....couldn't lay my hands out flat. My lips felt they were being drawn. Called Summit couple of times; no response. Late in the day, the PA called me back; and was frantic. Asked me if I had Tums—I did; she said take four immediately and then two every four hours. I asked what the urgency was about. She said she suspected my calcium had dropped significantly; and calcium controls the muscles, including the heart. She urged me to get to the emergency room if symptoms worsened; and to come in the next day. Apologized for not having called earlier... Had to have magnesium and calcium transfusions a couple of times. Became anemic and am still on iron. The side effects continued---bad rash; and electrolyte imbalance; and at #5, Dr. Burke said my body was saying I had enough and called it as the last treatment.

Four weeks after last chemo, I was up for my follow-up surgery. Called de-bulking and removal of the omentum and lots of biopsies. Same drill as before. May 31 night in the hospital, with the final report being great! No evidence of disease. Moving forward, monitor every three months for first year, then lengthening in time through the first five years. Then, we claim "remission"

Never a day goes by that I don't think about cancer. Over the past few weeks, I've had a scare and unfortunately, don't have the end result. My back has begun to hurt again (no pain at all since the first surgery) in the same place with no let-up. Had a CA-125 and results were excellent. CT scan next week; and hopefully will have some results. Of course, the back lesion still exists; and maybe I should contact Dr. Baker again.

I am very grateful that this unrelenting, horrible disease was caught in early stages; but continue to worry about its return. I am also extremely grateful for my friends, neighbors, colleagues; and close family for all the support, flowers, food, and moral support they provided.

And the journey continues.....

Marcia Miranda