

We Owe a Huge Debt

Life with Cancer

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Around Memorial Day, as we remember those who fought to preserve our safety and freedom, let's take a moment to remember those who fought, and lost, a no less valiant battle, their battle with cancer.

I often think about my friends, and those that I've known and lost, and ask Why? Why did they lose their battle and I'm still here? Why did my friend, who was diagnosed at the same time as me, lose her fight and yet I remain in remission? Why do some suffer and others not? They were good people, they didn't deserve it. No one does. In fact, cancer survivors are the most wonderful people I know.



Cancer brings out a certain quality in people. When you stare death in the face, and lose all perception of the immortality most of us feel as we stumble through life, there is a certain kind of courage which rises up, not dissimilar to those who fight for our country. We try to walk with dignity and composure in the face of extreme challenges. We are more compassionate of others, and more mindful of the loved ones around us. We wear our battle scars with pride, as a mark of our endurance, and we treasure the times when there is peace or respite.

But there are those who think that we shouldn't call it 'fighting cancer' at all. We shouldn't say 'we're in battle'. That's just too negative. Well, maybe they warmly welcomed cancer into their home, offered it a cup of tea and tried to mollify it, but that's certainly not what I'm doing. I'm at war, at war to preserve my family, to be the mother my children need, to be the voice of those who no longer have one, and to preserve the lives of those to come.

I've been extremely lucky so far. Cancer, as the medical researchers continue to discover, is a very individual disease. What was once thought as a one-size-fits-all malady is now proving to be more like a tailor-made disease. Take breast cancer, or should I say breast cancers. More and more sub-types are being discovered every year, with each requiring its own type of treatment. Every cancer is the same. There are hundreds of triggers and hundreds of targets which could kill the disease. Finding the right one is like looking for a needle in a haystack. I found my golden needle because of the countless women who thanklessly took part in the research before me. That's why some live a long and healthy life, whilst others stumble at the first hurdle. They just didn't find the right ammunition in time.

But we owe them an enormous debt, because treatment today is founded on the countless patients who also had the determination to fight, and in doing so helped improve the knowledge we need to conquer this disease. Knowledge is power in this ongoing battle. Some of us will get shot down, no matter how much we try to dodge the bullets, and other will return home safely to nurse their wounds. We're all fighting for something we believe in; we are good people. We deserve the inalienable right to watch our families grow, to pass on our knowledge and spirit to those around us, and to grow old together.

So in our fight to live today, we should remember those upon whose shoulders we stand tall. They earned their medals and, at peace, we should honor their memories. Their fight has allowed us to be the mothers, husbands, friends that we so much need to be. Because isn't that what war is all about? Preserving life as we know it?

Kay Kerbyson is an Associate Board Member of the Los Alamos Council on Cancer, and Founder/President of Ovarian Cancer Together Inc., the only non-profit specifically supporting and networking women in New Mexico with ovarian cancer. Resources, support and education materials, for those effected by cancer, can be found at www.losalamoscounciloncancer.org and www.ovariancancertogether.org