

Cancer Survivor Reflects on How ACS Helped Her Fight

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(East Alton, IL) – Monica Furlow knows firsthand the importance of the work the American Cancer Society does for patients, coming up on the two-year anniversary of the day she learned she had breast cancer.

Furlow, 52, of East Alton, is cancer free today – but her future seemed uncertain on March 31, 2008 when she got some news she wasn't ready to hear.

“The doctor called me and told me over the phone. I told her I did not have time for this, that my dad was really sick and I needed to take care of him. She informed me that if I did not take care of this, I might not be here to do it,” Furlow said.

Although there was a history of rectal, colon and stomach cancer in her family, Furlow, who never smoked a day in her life and was relatively healthy, never saw it coming.

“I was overwhelmed when I found out. I sat and cried for a few minutes, then I remembered what a friend of mine who had breast cancer once told me. She told me, ‘You can have cancer – or it can have you.’ I made up my mind then that I would fight and I would win,” she said.

It was a long road ahead for Furlow and her family.

“After surgery, I went for chemotherapy treatments, one every three weeks, and 22 radiation treatments. Now, I take a drug called Tamoxifen every day and will for five years,” she said. “I had an outpatient lumpectomy and my lymph nodes removed to make sure it had not spread there.”

During chemo, Furlow spent about seven hours each treatment Wednesday at the St. Louis Cancer and Breast Institute.

“I would do pretty well until Sunday and then I’d be down for a couple of days. By the time I really started to feel well again, it was time for another treatment,” she said.

She didn’t get too sick, but would be nauseated and have a bad metallic taste in her mouth. She kept her own hair for quite awhile too, but eventually did lose it on Memorial Day weekend.

“You know, that was the hardest part for me,” Furlow said. “Not that I had the most beautiful hair in the world, but it was really thick and it was MY hair.”

“Deon from the ACS in Maryville was the best,” she said. “She got out all kinds of wigs and helped me pick one out, and told me where to go to get it styled (Sizzor Shak in Collinsville, Ill.). Linda there is really great at styling them.”

In addition, they gave her information on other places to order wigs and scarves, where to go to get rides to and from doctor’s appointments if she didn’t have her own, dietary information and the details on a free community program called Look Good, Feel Good, dedicated to helping women.

The radiation treatments were very short time-wise, but did burn, she said.

“I finished my radiation treatments right before Labor Day weekend. It was a very unpleasant weekend. It took awhile for the burns to go away and my skin STILL looks burnt. The radiation made me very tired - I went home and took a nap most days,” Furlow said.

While trying to get better herself, she struggled with her father, whose health continued to fail.

“I knew then my dad was about to give up on life,” she said of her diagnosis. “Right before my surgery I had to put my dad in Rosewood Nursing home in Alton. My husband and I visited every day except the day I had my surgery, which was April 24, 2008.”

“I think after my surgery, dad knew my husband would take good care of me and he just gave up. He went into a coma on the 29th of April and passed away on May 1, 2008.”

Furlow’s support system, including her strong belief in God, friends and a husband who drove her to and from appointments and helped her through treatments, was in place to help her cope

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