

The View From Here

By: Justine Chichester

“Your present circumstances don’t determine where you can go. They merely determine where you start.” -Nido Qubien

I've recently taken some time off from writing. In fact, even as I type this, I am taking a huge breath trying to get back into the spirit of writing down all of my experiences living with a disability. The reason for my recent sabbatical from writing is that in February of this year I was diagnosed with Breast Cancer. After a routine mammogram, a mass was detected in my left breast. I had a subsequent ultrasound and biopsy, and then received the call from my radiologist informing me that it was, in fact, Cancer.

What followed were several months of identifying exactly what type of Cancer it was and what the best treatment would be for me. I never realized how little I knew about Cancer until I was told I had it. Terrified that now I had the “Big C” on top of my spinal cord injury, I immersed myself in research all the while trying to keep up my positive outlook on all of it. My biggest concern, of course, was how this would affect my physical therapy and my continued progress in walking again?

I am extremely lucky to have the most supportive family who went to all of the appointments with me, listened when I needed to vent and lifted me up whenever I felt low. Ultimately, I had a lumpectomy in April and 4 weeks of radiation followed. An oncotype test of the tumor determined that I did not need chemotherapy. The oncotype test is a tumor profiling test. It helps determine the benefit of using chemotherapy in addition to hormone therapy to treat some estrogen receptor-positive (ER-positive) Breast Cancers.

During radiation, although at times I was extremely fatigued, I was able to keep up my physical therapy schedule and continue my quest to walk again, which in turn helped keep me motivated throughout the duration of the four weeks. One of my radiation therapists said to me one morning, “You are one of the most positive and inspirational patients I’ve ever had in my 18 years here.” I explained to her that I felt like dealing with my spinal cord injury helped prepare me for my fight against Cancer. I truly feel that if I had been diagnosed with Cancer before my fall in September 2014, I would not have been able to tackle it with the strength and the positivity that I have today. That is all a result of suffering through this injury and living my best life with a disability.

I am so happy to report that I am now Cancer free and am continuing my rigorous physical therapy to get back on my feet again. I have recently left the house several times without my wheelchair, only using my walker (which is bright pink and black, of course!) all of which is huge progress from where I started several years ago. So, the fight and the progress continue. Finally, I am writing again. Which has always proved to be very therapeutic for me and often times really holds me accountable while keeping that positivity flowing. I know we could all use a little more of that in our lives!