

Hello everyone,

My name is Terry Nikkhoo and I'm a breast cancer survivor. I was diagnosed 7 and ½ years ago in March of 2010. My story began when I went to my daughter's school to donate blood, which is something that I do as often as I can. Somehow on that day I was not able to donate since they could not get a good blood draw which had never happened before. Little did I know then that not being able to donate was a blessing in disguise.

A week or so after that, I discovered a very small lump in my right breast through a self breast exam which I did ever month. Because of this, I was very familiar with my breast and knew that the lump was not there before. After talking to my doctor, she told me there probably wasn't anything to worry about since I was 42, no history of breast cancer in either side of my family, almost a vegetarian, non-smoker, non-drinker, and had breast fed each of my daughter's for 1 year. And I had had a mammogram 6 months before. She told me to keep an eye on it and if it didn't go away in a week, to come in for an exam. Sure enough, it didn't go away and I went in for an exam. Again, my doctor felt that it probably was nothing to worry about, but to put both our minds at ease she recommended that I go in for another mammogram and an ultrasound. Especially since we were planning my 1st daughter's bat mitzvah in May and we both wanted this not to be

in the back of our minds. Looking back, it would've been very easy for me to put this off until after the bat mitzvah since the chances supposedly were small that this was anything to worry about, but something was pushing me to do it then versus later. All I can say is thank god because those few months would have made a difference since the cancer was fast growing and had already spread to my lymph node. I went in for my mammogram and ultrasound. They found calcification which could have been nothing but I needed to do a needle biopsy to make sure. I did the biopsy on a Tuesday and received the results from my doctor on Wednesday afternoon. Needless to say, I was devastated to hear that I had cancer. I literally could not function for the 1st 2 days.

Then, my survival instinct kicked in. All I could think of was that I had to do all it took for me to beat this and be here for my 3 girls, 13, 10 and 6 at the time. They were the reason I got up every day to fight my battle. As you can imagine, I was on a roller coaster of emotions between dealing with my cancer and planning our daughter's Bat mitzvah. I took every precaution possible so that my kids would not find out until I told them after Tara's Bat Mitzvah.

No one knew except my immediate family and a few very close friends and Rabbi Feinstein. Rabbi gave me a special blessing next to the ark on the day of Tara's bat

mitzvah after the guests had moved to the foyer. It meant so much and it brought a sense of calm over me before the storm. I didn't want anything to overshadow Tara's hard work and her big day. I had a lot of decisions to make regarding surgery and treatment.

After countless doctors' visits, tests and scans, I started off by having a lumpectomy about 4 weeks before the bat mitzvah. The day after the bat mitzvah which was Mother's Day that year, I sat down with my kids and told them that mommy was sick and was going to do everything she can to get better. By that time, I had decided to do chemo, a double mastectomy, and radiation.

When starting chemo, I did everything in my power to never let the kids see me in poor health by having the worst days of my chemo fall on the weekend so that my husband could be with the kids. Other than that, as much as I could, I took care of the kids everyday things myself to keep a sense of normalcy. After the chemo, I had my 1st mastectomy at the City of Hope. On that day, I, along with my family, were of course very anxious for so many different reasons.

I later learned that Rabbi Feinstein made a point of being there to support me and my family which meant the world to all of us. Of course, it is not a surprise that he decided to be there for us without a second thought, because this is what

University Synagogue and its clergy are all about. That we belong to a synagogue community that cares about each other.

My recovery took two years, which included another mastectomy, radiation and reconstruction. There were definitely moments that I felt that I could not do this anymore, but knew that giving up was not an option. I cried, not in front of my kids as much as possible. One time I cried for a few hours straight. I think, I had kept it together for so long, I needed to let go.

I started lighting a candle every morning after my diagnosis to keep sane and to keep close to God to help me thru another day although there were days that I was angry with God. To this day, I still light a candle to start my day by praying and I use this moment to pray for others who need healing.

As individuals, illness can lead us to seek out ways to build our own resilience. My candle lighting ritual was one way to do that. Our Jewish tradition recognizes that we are a resilient people. Many of our Holy Days commemorate trials that we have endured as a people. In our most central prayer, the Amida, we praise God for “lifting up the fallen”. We have continued as in strength through our resilience – we rely on one another, we hold each other up, and we treat one another as

members of an extended family. May we all find one another as part of this community to be sources of strength in times of trial.

Shabbat Shalom