

## **What I Know Now – the Lessons of Breast Cancer** by Paula Holland De Long, ACC, CPCC

I'm Paula Holland De Long, current age 52, diagnosed at age 37 with stage one breast cancer. I had a lumpectomy, same side mastectomy ten days later, four months of chemotherapy, and reconstructive surgery twice. That I write these words so nonchalantly now is cause for joy because the experience was the most scary, chaotic, helpless time I have ever experienced. It was also the greatest gift I've ever received.

If Only I'd Known Then What I Know Now –

### **It's Probably Nothing ... Could Have Killed Me.**

"It's probably nothing but let's check just to be safe," led to the mammogram, biopsy, and the itchy pink paper gown I was wearing when "You have breast cancer and we need to do something about it now," came from the doctor's mouth.

Cancer?" I repeated. "But I'm only 37 there's no history in my family I'm perfectly healthy and you told me this pain was probably a fatty lump," my voice getting louder. Then breaking down, sobbing "OMG I'm going to die," and, "How can this be happening to me."

I was lucky. The idea that I could have cancer was so far off my radar that mentioning the pain I was experiencing in my breast was an afterthought during my annual physical. My doctor chose to check it out instead of waiting. So I'm here today.

Be assertive about taking care of your girls! Never assume that your age, lifestyle, or family history make you immune from cancer.

- Do your monthly self breast exams
- Talk to your doctor about screening that's appropriate for you. One size fits all screening doesn't hold true anymore.
- Pain or symptoms that don't go away in a short period of time **MUST BE CHECKED OUT**. If your doctor wants to wait **GET A SECOND OPINION**.

### **Riding the Emotional Roller Coaster Is Normal**

The following weeks were a roller coaster of swirling terror, anger, guilt, anxiety, sadness, and confusion, punctuated by bouts of depression and numbness. Cancer chaos pushed me so far out of my comfort zone I never knew what to expect from one moment to the next. Despite all the support I was receiving I had never felt more alone. I remember thinking I was the only one who felt like this, and being so afraid it would never end.

I needed to hear, "Your emotions are normal. Holding them in will make it worse," from someone who had been there and done it. I never imagined what I was feeling was normal and natural. "You won't be this way forever," she finished, and I was finally able to breathe again.

That these so called "negative" emotions were normal seems obvious. "Holding them in makes it worse," gave me pause." My entire adult life had been spent holding my emotions in. Hmmm.

What's important about this?

- Chaotic, roller coaster emotions are normal during a crisis. They don't last forever.
- Releasing emotions reduces fear, stress and anxiety. Holding them in creates dis-ease.
- Patients need to connect with other survivor ASAP when diagnosed.

### **There's No *Right* Way to Have Cancer**

During chemo I kept my "I'm fine" face on and my wig straight in 90 degree heat and 90% humidity, determined to prove chemo wouldn't keep me from my normal responsibilities. Hearing "Do you

need an ambulance?” from the clerk holding my wig after waking up from a dead faint in the grocery checkout line forced me to admit that my attempts to stay “normal” were making me sicker.

I was convinced I should be doing better at keeping it all together. Felt like I was failing at cancer. ”I can’t even grocery shop anymore,” I whined. Finally, one of my nurses said, “Paula, you’re human. How can you expect perfection from yourself at a time like this?! There’s no right way to have cancer.” The physical and emotional effects of surgery and chemo forced me to give myself permission to be sick.

I learned to

- Let go of my responsibilities
- Take care of myself first
- Ask for help for the first time in my adult life

Surprise, the world didn’t stop turning without my normal contributions.

### **If Not Now When?**

Hoorah!! The magic day finally came. Treatment was done. Everyone was so thrilled that I was “done” with cancer, and my life could go back to normal. I wasn’t. Exhausted, depressed, anxious, and forgetful, I weighed 95 lbs. with my GI Jane hair and scars. The thought of going back to my high stress executive position made me nauseous. Going back to my old life has lost its appeal, and I realized a lot of it had helped make me sick.

I took a lower paying, less stressful job as I healed. Started gardening and walking the dog. Soon my husband was asking me “Who are you and what have you done with Paula?” I had no idea who I was, but I was getting clear about what I wasn’t.

Over the next few years I learned to trust intuition over logic. Started making choices based on how they made me feel vs. what I had always done. Not long after my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, I took the biggest leap of faith of my life. Over a four month period my husband and I parted (amicably); I gave notice to my job; bought my own house; and started my own company.

So there I was. No husband, no clients, with a looming mortgage payment. The voices in my head were screaming things like “You’re too old to start over. You only have one breast; no one will want ever want you again,” and “you’re going to fail and be living in your car.”

Everyone thought I was crazy, or having a mid-life crisis, and maybe I was. I did know in my heart and my soul that I was doing what I was meant to do, and I was powerless to deny it.

I know now that normal isn’t where we thrive as humans. To thrive we have to:

- Get risky about being who we truly are.
- Make choices based on intuition and resonance, not only logic and thinking.
- Get out of our comfort zones and do what we think we can’t.

### **If I Can Do Cancer I Can Do Anything**

Facing death created a new urgency about making the most of my time and stripped away my tolerance for small stuff. I wasn’t willing to settle for the should’s and have-to’s that made up most of my life before cancer. For the first time, I wasn’t afraid of the unknown. I was afraid of the undone, the un-lived, of returning to my level, boring before cancer self.

Cancer was my wake-up call. My journey took away my marriage, and led me to my soul mate. Cancer forced me to admit that I hated my career, and inspired me leave it and pursue my passion. Ultimately cancer taught me that I can do anything, and gave me the gift of allowing people to help

me do it. I often wonder why it took something like cancer to make me fully alive. My hope is that you won't put it off like I did. Why wait?

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Cancer survivor, professional life coach, award-winning author, and inspirational speaker Paula Holland De Long is an authority on how the lessons of survivorship can bring joy, passion and purpose to anyone's life. Her personal battle with cancer inspired her to found **What's Next For My Life, Inc.**, whose award winning self-guided cancer journals, workshops, and support products are offered at cancer treatment centers, support organizations, and directly to patients and survivors. To learn more call 954-565-6894, email [paula@WhatsNextForMyLife.com](mailto:paula@WhatsNextForMyLife.com) or visit [WhatsNextForMyLife.com](http://WhatsNextForMyLife.com).