

## My cancer year taught me how lucky I really am



**BARB GUY**

I've waited a year to write today's column.

When diagnosed with breast cancer last July, I talked with friends who went before me. They offered an informal orientation. They said for the next year my life wouldn't be mine. They said it takes one year to get through breast cancer and another to get over having gone through it.

Maybe it's my attention span, but spending a year on cancer seemed insurmountable. I rebelled against it, instead thinking of each phase separately: tests, surgery, recovery, 16 weeks of chemotherapy, six weeks of daily radiation, more recovery. Not a year, just several unpleasant chunks of time strung together.

I tried to draw boundaries around cancer. I didn't read

about it, Google it or let my doctors tell me in what "stage" I was. I tried to stay out of the breast cancer industrial complex.

But I did what I was told. I endured ungodly, humiliating tests, kept a zillion appointments, took a yachtload of unpleasant drugs and met an army of medical people, many of whom saw me naked. I learned about the chill of chemo and I now know what bone pain and neuropathy are.

I lost my hair, eyelashes and eyebrows. Parts of my right side are permanently numb. I experienced anaphylactic shock. Twice.

My medical tab is in the neighborhood of a quarter mil. Thanks to insurance, it has only cost me a few thousand. Unless you count being unable to earn money for most of a year.

Ten days after receiving my diagnosis, I announced it in *The Trib*. People who had faced cancer, friends and strangers alike, told me I was strong enough. They shared their stories. They said I'd be amazed by the goodness of people. They said I'd find out who my friends are.

A year later, it has all come true. Somewhere between last July and this one, there's a long, foggy expanse of time I don't

remember well. But indelible in my memory is an unending parade of kind people doing remarkable things.

That first day, Cathy offered to arrange a cadre of friends to deliver dinners to Chris and me during chemo. The meals offered double sustenance because each one, apart from being delightful and unique, brought smiling friends into our house.

I was constantly overwhelmed by emotion in the face of surprising demonstrations of solidarity and love. Foremost were visits - it takes guts to visit someone with cancer. Also cards, bouquets, books, house cleaning, crayoned scrawls from beloved kids, dog walking, special rocks, chocolate, a sympathetic ear, long letters, phone calls, gifts on my doorstep, laughter, leaf raking, knitting lessons, prayers, artwork, stuffed animals, baked goods, movies, Barbie tattoos for my bald head, milagros, e-mails, snow shoveling, Hello Kitty and hats.

Clients forgave missed or abandoned deadlines. Some *Trib* readers offered their hearts. People wore my name in the Race for the Cure. Two European friends came to the states in part or wholly to check on me. Plus, just try and buy your own lunch when you have cancer.

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With all that help, I have survived the year. Last week's mammogram showed no sign of trouble, but I know too well that no one is ever really finished with cancer.

I haven't had any life-changing epiphanies; maybe it's too soon or maybe I'm too dense. I do know that I had the good fortune to marry a hero. And as I said last July, I have more lovely friends than I deserve.

In the past year, I had to grow a bigger heart to house all the gratitude I feel. I've told a lot of people that I love them. I feel loved in return.

I understand how lucky I am.

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*BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages.* © Salt Lake Tribune.