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Jane Hill: Control your attitude and outlook

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Growing up, the only lumps I knew were the ones in my Thanksgiving gravy. I know differently now, after finding a lump at age 32 in the last place I expected to find one: my breast. Although that lump was benign, a mammogram eight years later discovered cancer in another part of my breast that wasn't caught by an exam. So on May 24, 1991, I embarked on a 20-year journey of survivorship that began with a diagnosis that would forever change my life.

"Let's not tell anyone," my husband said to me after I was diagnosed, and for good reason. Back then, many people viewed breast cancer as a death sentence and were afraid to share that they had the disease. Even though it had been around for many years, information, diagnostic tools and treatment options were still limited when compared to the resources available today.

I went in on the Friday before Memorial Day for a lumpectomy, thinking I'd be back to work after the long weekend. Little did I know, this would be the first of four surgeries I'd have within six months – with even more to come in the following years.

My doctor had an answer for me when I woke up from my surgery, so I didn't have to wait three agonizing days for my results: not only was it breast cancer, but the pathology showed it was aggressive, fast-growing and present throughout the entire tumor. Thank goodness for early detection.

That summer, I made the difficult decision to undergo a mastectomy. No woman ever wants to lose a breast, but more importantly I didn't want to lose my life. My breast cancer support group helped me get through my mastectomy, the reconstructive surgeries that followed and the long road ahead as a survivor.

I still remember the first thought that flew through my head when I was diagnosed: "Thank God it's not my daughter." As a mother to a 10-year-old, I knew I had to survive to raise her and one day help create a world where breast cancer didn't exist.

At that moment, I made three promises to myself that I have been working to fulfill over the past 20 years: to make sure breast cancer was something my daughter never had to deal with, to promote the importance of early detection – a tool that saved my life – and to help other cancer survivors through their journeys.

The first thing I did to make part of that promise a reality was to perform comedy for other cancer patients at Hoag Hospital between my third and fourth surgeries. I had gotten into comedy six months before my diagnosis and found that humor was a tool that helped me cope with my own breast cancer. I hoped to bring some lightheartedness into the lives of other patients as well.

Something I've learned as a survivor that still holds true today is we can't always control what happens to us, but we can control our attitude. Also, there's nothing funny about having cancer, but we can learn to look for humor in our everyday lives.

Another part of my promise came about two weeks after my fourth surgery. I decided to begin volunteering with the Orange County Affiliate of Susan G. Komen for the Cure to help vocalize the importance of early detection and help find a cure. Because the Affiliate had just launched in 1991, I had an opportunity to help the organization grow from the ground up.

Besides volunteering in various roles, sometimes 20+ hours a week, I have been joined by my family in helping out at every Komen Orange County Race for the Cure since it began in 1992. I believe that everything we do for the organization has made a difference, from the Survivor Tribute and speaking out about breast health awareness, to my daughter Kelly, at age 12, serving as Charter Vice President for Komen Kids (now Kids Connected), a friendship and support network for the children of parents with cancer.

I see the difference we've made in the faces of the survivors at every Race. Each one of us represents hope for the cure. Women who have been newly diagnosed can look at those of us who wear 20 strands of beads around our necks, signifying 20 years of advancements in research, education and outreach – made possible by organizations like Komen and individuals that are helping us save lives on our way to finding the cure.

Because of early detection, I've been blessed to have the last two decades to watch my daughter grow up and play with my two special grandsons, and in my 20 years as a survivor, I've met many wonderful people and have also lost good friends. But with loss I have learned an important lesson: Not everyone can be cured, but together we can help others along in the healing process.