

IN EVERY ISSUE

The Last Tenth

BY JEN HOFFMANN

A trek to the finish line.

I remember when Greg and I ran my first half marathon. We had just crossed over the Mill Avenue Bridge in Tempe, Arizona, and I saw the 12-mile marker. That distance may have been the farthest I had run at that point, and I let out a triumphant yell.

Greg, who was running in front of me, whirled around to see whether I had fallen or met some other untimely demise. With an enormous smile on my face, I shook my head and told him I just realized how far I had come, and that I knew I could finish.

And then I remember getting so tired. It was as if I started to celebrate too soon when I still had more to dig deep and find. I remember him telling me, “I only need 10 more minutes from you, and then we’re done. Not even 10 minutes. You have got this”

I ran on, and although the last one-tenth mile seemed endless, the finish line was finally in sight. Just before we crossed the sensors, Greg reached over and grabbed my hand. Exultant, we finished together, and I looked up at the clock. I had beaten my goal time by nearly seven minutes. Mission accomplished, over and above my expectations.

I can see a different 12-mile marker ahead of me now. Or, at least, I think I can, although it still seems so far away. The difference is that the distance equals two more weeks of treatment for a recurrence of breast cancer. I must lace my shoes tighter, dig deeper than I think I can, take the deepest breath I can muster, smile through it all, and battle on to the morning of December 19, 2007—the last day of chemo and my 13-mile finish line.

I’m not quite ready for the triumphant yell, and perhaps I don’t quite realize how far I’ve actually come. Maybe the dark circles around my eyes and the alien I see in the mirror cloud my vision. Maybe I should remember that I have an incredible husband who has sat with me through every week of treatment, always treating me like a person instead of a patient. Maybe I need to remember that six months is a small period of time in the big picture. Maybe I simply need to suck it up when I feel ugly and tired and fat and so ready for my life back that I can taste it.

I can’t understand why it’s become agonizingly hard when I’m so close to the end of this chapter. I desperately need the break from treatment, but I know there is the likelihood that I will need more chemo after the January surgery has removed

all offending masses from my system. For now, the respite is my finish line, my final peak to summit. I just need to get there.

Between now and then, I must find as much laughter and love whenever and wherever I can. I must focus on the fact that these treatments are working and that I'm steps closer to being reacquainted with my elusive friend NED (No Evidence of Disease). I must remember that I'm alive and strong, and that the poisons they are pumping into me, although they have taken a toll on my physical and emotional self, will enable me to live for many years after this one.

I may need a little extra push at times, and I don't always know how to ask for that, which comes with the territory of being stubborn and wanting to be self-sufficient. It's times like these that I must remember the promise to myself and those who love me that I will not attempt to battle alone.

"... only need 10 more minutes from you, and then we're done. ... You have got this"

Jen Hoffmann, 37, lives with her husband, Greg, in Phoenix. A scan on April 23, 2008, four days before their first wedding anniversary, showed no evidence of disease and she continues to do well following another scan in August.

Send your essays on cancer to editor@curetoday.com.