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Growing Up with Cancer

BY KATHY LATOUR

Despite both of us being from Dallas, I first met Wendy Harpham in Charlotte, North Carolina, at the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship assembly in 1992, an event put on by NCCS in the early 1990s that brought together cancer survivors from around the country.

Wendy's first book was just out and mine, *The Breast Cancer Companion*, was on the way. It was one of those "me too" discussions.

"I'm writing a book."

"Me too."

"I have an 8-year-old daughter."

"Me too."

But then Wendy outdid me. Not only did she have an 8-year-old, she had a 6-year-old daughter and a 4-year-old son. Then we did what many mothers with cancer do, we talked about the fear of not raising our children and not being there for the special days in their lives. Wendy and I have never talked on the phone without updating each other on our children's accomplishments, not to brag but to celebrate yet another milestone of parenting.

Wendy recently told me of the night she and her son William began their evening ritual with prayers and some mommy time, and the joy she felt when William started a story with, "Mom, remember when we..." For many mothers, such a moment is common, but for Wendy it marked the moment she knew her son would remember her if she died.

In the ensuing years, I heard of other mile-stones, including bar and bat mitzvahs, high school graduations and musical performances, events that Wendy feared she wouldn't be alive to see.

Rebecca, Jessica and William, who were 5, 3 and 1 when she was diagnosed, have grown up in a family where, for many years, cancer drove much of their family life. And even during the years when Wendy wasn't in treatment, the family lived around a schedule that included knowing that if their mother did not rest, it could incapacitate her since she suffered from chronic fatigue.

For Rebecca (Becca to everyone who knows her), the memory is the longest and most poignant. Now a 21-year-old college junior, Becca has clear memories of spending hours making her mother cards when the children could not be near her because of Wendy's low blood counts. Becca is clear on what cancer means to her

family. “My mom’s experience has shaped me into the woman I am today,” says Becca, adding that it didn’t really hit her until she started college that she doesn’t have the same sense of invincibility as many of her friends.

“When I see friends I cherish the time I have and don’t take it for granted,” she says. “Death was very real in my house. I don’t feel that the relationships I have with the ones I love should be taken for granted, and I am blessed for that. When I show enthusiastic gratitude for everyday things, my friends think I am hilarious.”

Becca says the best thing her parents did was tell her and her siblings the truth and talk openly about everything. She says it made the family close because they shared a common enemy in cancer, which has created a bond among the three children.

Jessica (Jessie) Harpham agrees. Because her mom was diagnosed when she was only 3, Jessie just remembers her mom being sick until she was in the fourth grade. “I don’t remember life before it, but my parents tried hard not to make it the central part of our lives. We played sports and my dad coached basketball, soccer and softball.” All three children remember their mother as front and center at their activities, something they recognize would not have been the case had she been a full-time doctor.

Family dinners are a favorite memory for Jessie, now on a full scholarship at the University of Texas at Dallas, where her dad, Ted, teaches (and often treats her to lunch).

Jessie and Becca say their parents were a united front on every topic. When the last recurrence was discovered late last year, it was finals week for the girls, both of whom had international travel plans during the break. Wendy and Ted still wanted the girls to stick with their plans, says Jessie, “but it was hard to hear she was sick again. They just said be sure to ask questions and talk.” Which is exactly what the Harpham children did that night. They stayed up until early in the morning talking out their feelings about what was happening and coming together in a way that a family crisis prompts.

As the oldest, Becca was the one the other two looked to for information. But this past December, it was 17-year-old William who brought the girls up-to-date on how their mom was doing, a role he had not played before. “When she was first diagnosed I was barely 2, and over the years, it’s been there but I was so naïve,” says William, now a high school junior and active in a mock trial program. Indeed, he says that it wasn’t until the latest recurrence that it really sank in what cancer means for his mother and the family.

“We started talking one night after the recurrence and I started asking questions for the first time,” William says. “I asked questions for about two hours and it was questions I didn’t know I had.”

Despite being the youngest, it’s William who sums up why the Harpham family is different from all others. “We have grown up in a place where you have to tell everyone how you feel and that you love them because you don’t know when you will see them again.” Becca agrees, conceding that the latest recurrence has been hard. “The first thing that hit me was, ‘Will she see me get married?’ The next milestone is always there.”

