

Young, in love, and diagnosed

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I had one of those lunches yesterday. You know the ones I mean if you make yourself available to the newly diagnosed like I have for the past 23 years. Not that any of these meetings are easy, but this one was particularly hard because it was with a former student of mine from Southern Methodist University.

The last time I saw her we were in Washington, D.C. at the first inaugural of George W. Bush. She was part of a group of students that I was overseeing as they took it all in – the parties, the politics, the fact that the country was being run by 20somethings. She graduated in 2002 and I had lost touch – like I have with many of my former students until they look me up for advice, a job tip, or just to say hello.

This reunion was different. She has just been diagnosed with breast cancer – at age 29. Over the years, I've heard from many of my former students when mothers or grandmothers were diagnosed, but this is the first time it was a former student. How can this be? She is too young, just as I was when I was 37 and facing my diagnosis. And what do I say? Luckily, she has gotten really good medicine so far – a gynecologist paid close attention to her when she said her father's sister had been diagnosed with breast cancer at 48. The same gynecologist didn't try to placate her when a lump appeared in her breast in April – two months after she married her honey of five years. I applaud this doc who didn't say, "You are too young to get breast cancer." Instead she said, "get thee to a breast surgeon," giving her the name of one of the top guys in the city.

He felt certain it was a benign condition called a fibroid adenoma, but said he would feel better taking it out. So he did. And surprise – cancer.

She has since learned that she has the BRCA 2 gene – probably from her dad, although the rest of the family has yet to be tested.

She is handling it as well as can be expected, but it really was hard to hear her talk about her wedding and plans for babies.

"I finally was able to look at the wedding pictures last week," she told me. "I looked at that girl in the picture and had a hard time remembering her and how she felt about life."

I hate this disease.