



## Andrea R.

The summer of 2013 was supposed to be the best summer ever – my family and I just moved back to our hometown of Rochester, my sister’s wedding was approaching, as was my birthday. My birthday wish was that the lump in my breast was not cancer.

On July 23rd, ten days after my 31st birthday, my biopsy results came back. I had been nauseous all day waiting, knowing that it wouldn’t be good news; the radiologist all but officially diagnosed me the day before. I couldn’t believe this was happening to me. Why me? Why NOW? I have 2 young children, ages 4 and 18 months, both of whom I breastfed for almost a year. I eat organically, I’m a Zumba instructor, and have no family history. Why was I proving all the statistics wrong? It was inconceivable.

I quickly found doctors so I could get that thing off. My body, the one that had grown and fed my children, betrayed me. I opted for a single mastectomy. It was all so overwhelming, and the plan was for a third child in the future, so I wanted to keep the “good” breast. My doctors were fantastic and scheduled me right away. Unfortunately I had 4 positive nodes, so those had to go too. The final report was ER/PR+, HER2 equivocal (another statistically small percentage), and borderline Stage IIB/IIIA. Four weeks after surgery, I was dancing at my sister’s wedding.

The week after my daughter started preschool, I started 5 months of chemo, followed by radiation. Family members and babysitters helped out every day and also brought us meals. Physically I managed well and was proud of how I got through it. Emotionally, I felt like I missed out on 8 months, constantly being at treatment or appointments and not fully being with my kids due to fogginess and fatigue.

Soon after I was diagnosed, women from every corner reached out to tell me they were survivors. It was encouraging but also maddening; too many families are affected by cancer. They referred me to doctors, pointed me to the Breast Cancer Coalition, and tried to keep me afloat so I wouldn’t drown in fear. My family listened, cried, made me laugh, changed their diet with me, and believed I could get through it.

Cancer comes out of nowhere, turns your life upside down, forces you to crawl out from under the rubble and build your life back up piece by piece. And even when all the pieces are put back in their places, life doesn’t look the same. The most significant loss that I still feel every day is the loss of the family I dreamed of. I was supposed to have three kids. My husband and I decided we’re going to focus on and enjoy the family we already have. I struggle with “living in the moment/live life to its fullest” because the thing that brings the most joy, my family, is also the source of my greatest fear. Hopefully the fear will fade away, and my purpose or the “good” that people tell me can come out of this, will become clearer. I’m grateful there are places like BCCR to offer support, information, a safe place, and most importantly to me, that there IS life after cancer and I too can survive long enough to see my children grow up.