

“YOU’LL NEVER PLAY TENNIS AGAIN”

by Barbara Hattermer

I donned my new wig and drove to the tennis courts for the first time in nine months. Friendly greetings from team-mates, warming up for their weekly practice session, eased my nervousness. I swung at the ball and winced as pain pierced my right arm and pulled at the spot where my breast had been. I broke into a sweat in spite of the breeze that was blowing.

My balls fell short. What would they think if they noticed? Would they decide I was no longer fit for the team?

I remembered the day my doctor entered his examining room, arranged his papers in order, and said, “You have cancer in three places.” He looked into my eyes. “And you will never play competitive tennis again.”

Tear drops formed, spilled from my eyes and trickled down my cheeks, intermittently, for the rest of the day. While the dreaded C-word hung in the air, my thoughts focused on losing my spot on my tennis team. Our team was made up of competitive but considerate ladies thought to be the most fun team in our community. At age 72, tennis was still my favorite sport.

Breast cancer! No time for fear. The next two weeks presented a whirl of choices and decisions. Would I go the route of a radical mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiation or would I look to alternative medicine and a healthy diet? Would I go to a nationally

known clinic, a research clinic three hours away or would I have it done at home by my dispassionate but competent doctor?

Friends and acquaintances offered advice and brought me books to read about cancer. The stack reached half way to the ceiling. But I resisted focusing on cancer. I turned to the Lord, asking Him to open doors He wanted me to walk through and to shut doors that were wrong for me.

My husband drove me to a well-recommended research clinic three hours away. Traffic crawled, horns honked, and time passed. Fighting that drive twice a week did not appeal. The caring doctor, eager to have me for a patient, gave us all the time we wanted. But because the cancer measured stage three and he practiced at a research institute, he would take all of my lymph nodes whether necessary or not.

Back home I listened to stories of women with breast cancer who had developed lymphodema. Their arms swelled and remained full of liquid because their lymph system was compromised. My tennis arm could be affected!

In the end I agreed to surgery and 12 weeks of chemotherapy. I chose my local doctor who played tennis and understood the importance of keeping as many lymph nodes as possible.

The decision made, I spent the waiting time in prayer and Bible Study. Five friends committed to come to my house every Sunday afternoon to pray with me, before and after the operation. They came with high expectations. As we prayed together, the Lord's presence manifested. They received as many blessings as I did.

During those weeks the Lord separated me from the world and surrounded me with what seemed like a very large bubble. Just He and I were in it. I have never felt so close to Him. Frequently I felt waves of the Holy Spirit wash over me.

The day of my surgery soon arrived. As I changed into a hospital gown, I looked into the mirror at the breast that would soon meet the surgeon's knife. "It's a miracle," I said, "I don't feel one bit of fear or anxiety."

Friends visited and prayed with me as I waited to be taken to the operating room. Nurses allowed four people to visit me at one time. When four left, four more entered. My minister came and prayed with me. A friend, who had had the operation and survived it, held my hands until they wheeled me away. My husband gave me a final embrace at the entrance to the operating room.

My daughter took vacation time from her job and flew in from San Francisco to care for me. My four children phoned regularly. Recovery brought letters and cards full of accolades, usually reserved for funerals, from friends all over the country. Members of my tennis team brought meals every day for weeks. I have never felt so loved and valued.

Shortly after the operation, I started physical therapy, stretching my arm many times each day. As the months of chemotherapy dragged on, I decided against radiation. My body had been assaulted enough.

Here I was on the courts a month after the last chemotherapy treatment. Could I still play? My husband had hit soft balls to me, gradually increasing their speed and pace. Slowly my arm had strengthened, but as I saw how hard my team-mates were hitting the ball, my courage wavered. How could I compete with them?

I ran to the net to reach a short ball. "Great effort," my partner exclaimed. As I turned toward her a gust of wind blew up and lifted my wig. It circled in the air, sailed across the court and landed out of bounds on the clay. Flustered and turning beet red, I rushed to pick it up and cover my bald head. Three team-mates surrounded me with their arms. "Great to have you back," they said. Mortified and thrilled at the same time, I smiled at them.

"You can't imagine how good it is to be back," I said.

Three years later our team won the District Championships. I was overjoyed to take part in it.

The Lord not only answered my prayer for survival, He granted me one of the delights of my life. I am still playing tennis.