



*Teresa took part in SCCC's "Survive, Thrive & Be Fit" 3-day/36-mile backpacking trip in May of 2015 that will be featured in an upcoming episode of Outdoor Wisconsin!*

## **Teresa Konz**

### **Breast Cancer Survivor**

*Diagnosed: July 3, 2014*

*Teresa will be turning 50 soon. She has been married to her husband ??? for x years and has x sons. She lives in Kiel and works as a Certified Nursing Assistant.*

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**NOTE FROM TIM:** *Teresa didn't get involved in the TLC Supportive Community because she was struggling through the cancer experience. Instead, she came because she was looking for a way to give back and she was looking for a place in which she could express her gratitude for the joys and blessings she has experienced along her journey. Of course, TLC is a great place to go if you are feeling alone, if you are facing great challenges, or if you are feeling overwhelmed! But it is also a great place to go to enjoy yourself, to share your successes, to engage in life-affirming discussions and meet some incredibly inspirational people like Teresa! I think most who are part of the TLC Supportive Community, will tell you that we laugh more than we cry, we are more concerned with living than with dying, and... perhaps more than anything... we have fun!*

### **In the spring of 2014...**

I was working a job that did not provide health insurance benefits and my husband is self-employed so neither of us had health insurance. But thanks to Obamacare, we signed up for health insurance in spring of 2014. A few months later I felt a shooting pain in my right breast and when my hand went there I felt a lump. I wasn't too concerned because when I was about 18 I had a pea-sized nodule in my right breast. I went to see a specialist and, after an ultra sound, I was told that it was nothing to be concerned about.

I thought it was best to have it checked out, though. I hadn't been feeling very well; feeling nauseated and tired, and I was losing weight. I also have a family history of breast cancer. My sister was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer when she was 29 years old. She underwent a lumpectomy followed by chemotherapy and radiation. As of now she has been cancer-free for

more than 20 years... so that's really good news! My sister has been and continues to be a huge inspiration to me! I also have an aunt on my father's side with breast cancer.

I saw my doctor who scheduled a mammogram. After the mammogram I was told to wait to see if the radiologist needed more tests. While I was waiting another woman came in, had her mammogram and they told her, "Everything's great! We'll see you in a few years!" I started getting nervous because I was still there... waiting. Then they did an ultrasound.

On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, I got a phone call from my doctor who said, "I hate to do this over the phone, but I have to tell you that you have breast cancer." I was in complete and utter shock!

### **The first thing that came to my mind wasn't, "Am I going to die?"**

I had just purchased a used car and I had a loan that I needed to pay back and I didn't know how this might affect my income or my ability to work. When you are diagnosed with cancer it's not like all of life's other worries magically go away so you can deal with cancer... in fact those everyday worries and concerns often get BIGGER!

Knowing that my sister had survived it and was about twenty years cancer-free helped pave the way for me... so I really didn't have any fears that I wasn't going to survive this... but I did worry about how we would be able to manage financially!

### **I decided I wanted to be very aggressive with my treatment.**

I opted for a bilateral mastectomy and chemotherapy. My sister, who supported me every step of the way, sort of freaked me out when she explained, "*When I had my port put in it felt like they were doing dental work on my heart!*" Eeks! So before the surgery for the port placement I told the surgeon what my sister said and said, "I have a really good right hook... so if you hurt me I'm gonna start swinging!" ☺ But actually, I felt absolutely nothing!

### **About the time my hair started falling out...**

my son told me that he had noticed a mass on one of his testicles. I think my situation caused him to take it more seriously and I told him he needed to get it checked out. I was more concerned about his health than my own! He's my son... my baby... and I didn't care what happened to me as long as he would be okay. They removed one of his testicles and, thankfully, it turned out to be a self-contained tumor so he didn't need any further treatment and he's doing fine today!

### **After my first chemo I felt like I had been struck by lightning.**

Not that I know what it feels like to get struck by lightning... but if I had to imagine how it felt... this would be it! I felt light-headed, I had this tingly sensation, and I was just extremely tired and I felt out of synch. But after the first couple chemos I started to figure out what I could eat and drink and what I could not. Sure, I had diarrhea, I would feel nauseated, and nothing really tasted good. And there was the bone pain from head to toe from the growth factors that also made it very difficult to sleep. But it wasn't nearly as bad as what I had expected... and that was a pleasant surprise!

My sister had told me stories of how sick she was and how she had to crawl between the couch and the bathroom because she had absolutely no energy. I was afraid that was what it was going to be like for me... but I was in awe of the advancements they've made in cancer treatment. She really went through the wringer... and what I went through was so much more mild in comparison to what she went through.

### **Eventually, the bills started rolling in.**

I wasn't able to work much. My husband was working three jobs but our high deductible insurance was overwhelming us financially. I work as a CNA for Field of Dreams Assisted

Living in Kiel and the staff, my co-workers and the residents did a fundraising brat fry benefit with raffles for us. Then my family had a benefit for us as well. That really eased the financial burden while I wasn't able to work and I am so very grateful and feel super-super blessed!

I made it through chemo and had my final breast reconstruction surgery done in January of 2015. It was about this time that Dr. Bettag suggested that I consider getting involved in TLC and Survive, Thrive & Be Fit. I was probably at the highest point in my life because I was feeling so loved and so supported after everything that had happened and I was really looking for a way to give back!

### **I started coming to TLC in early 2015 and I met some great people.**

After treatment is over people tend to just think, "Oh, you're fine now!" I think they want to forget about the cancer... but I don't want to forget about it because I have learned some valuable lessons about myself and my life that I want to explore. So it was great to be a part of those activities where we all supported one another and got to share what we learned and how our lives can be better after our cancer experiences. If anyone thinks that we all sit around and complain when we get together... well, they're wrong and maybe they just need to join us sometime. It's fun and enjoyable... It's remarkable and amazing!

### **In March I started going to ST&BF yoga.**

I absolutely fell in love with that! Yoga takes any kind of stress from my day and just washes it away! Then in April I did the Cancer Crusade cancer walk. That was a pivotal event for me as it was one of my first steps to getting back to life following my cancer treatment... and I plan on making that an annual event because it is a good reminder to me of what is important and a great way to celebrate!

### **In May I signed up for the ST&BF backpacking trip along the Ice Age Trail.**

I had never backpacked before but I saw it as a great opportunity to prove to myself that, despite everything that I had been through, I could still take on and accomplish a physical challenge. The hike was tough! There were times I had to ask myself, "What did I get myself into?" There were times I really didn't know what I was doing! But even though I struggled... I didn't give up! Of course, I have to thank all of the other survivors that supported and encouraged me... but I did it! WE DID IT!!! Even though we all were on our own unique... when things get tough I think we all need each other! *(NOTE: This 3-day/35-mile trip that took place in May of 2015 will be featured in a June episode of "Outdoor Wisconsin. Watch "The Local Cancer Community Update" for details.)*

### **In June I took part in the ST&BF kayak outing.**

It was my first time kayaking and I loved that! I used some birthday money last year to buy a kayak which I see as a healthy investment. I am out there... on the water... in the peace and tranquility of nature... and it rejuvenates me in body, mind and spirit! That's priceless... and a small investment considering all of the joy that comes from it!

When I was younger I put myself down a lot because I was sort of awkward and was never much into sports. As a result, I didn't have the courage to do these things and I limited myself. Survive, Thrive & Be Fit gave me the opportunity to try things like yoga, backpacking and kayaking and I'm finding a part of me that I never knew existed. It's like, "Wow, I can do these things!" I'm realizing I am a much stronger and more capable person than I realized! I am much more active now than I was before treatment and I plan to get even more active.

### **I can use these activities to help me deal with the stresses of life.**

I can turn some of my anxiety and nervous energy into something positive! I can't believe what I've been missing out on all of these years! It's like I found this great big secret... but it really isn't a secret! Anyone can do these things... you just have to find the opportunities, eliminate the excuses, and then just get out there and do it!!! And just spending time in nature... being able to breathe... breathing in fresh air... absorbing all of the sights, the sounds, the smells! It's an amazing feeling!!!

**I don't look at my cancer journey as a negative experience at all... it has truly been a positive experience.**

I think I am more spiritual now than I was before cancer. I don't worry about some of the things I once worried about. I am better at taking the things that are beyond my control and turning them over to a higher power. So instead of filling my head with negative thoughts and obsessing over things that are beyond my control I try to fill my head with positive thoughts and focus on all that I have and all that I can be grateful for and I realize the many ways I've been blessed. I still have issues... I'm not perfect! I still worry... but not as much! There is still a lot of bad stuff related to cancer... but I try to draw on the good that has come from it!

**I won't Let Myself Forget What My Experience Taught Me.**

Unfortunately, I have been working a lot of hours again... and I've been falling back to some of my old ways and I really do miss the group and I really do want to get back to TLC and to some the Survive, Thrive & Be Fit activities which is why I made a special point to participate in this year's Cancer Crusade.

One of the lessons that I learned through my cancer journey is that life is about balance! Or, as my husband often says, "Everything in moderation!" I'm feeling myself lose some of that balance and I need to find it again!

And, as my sister who is a flight attendant reminds me, "You have to put your oxygen mask on first!" I know I have to take care of myself first!