

Tahoe doc knows what 'you have breast cancer' means

Publisher's note: October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. People are affected by cancer in all sorts of ways and communities do various things to shine a spotlight on various cancers. This is the second of four stories about cancer.

By Kelly Shanahan

You have breast cancer. Four small words that can change a life. Usually I am the one saying those words, but in April 2008, I was on the receiving end.

Actually, I was looking at the mammogram with Dr. Betsy Card at Great Basin Imaging and she didn't really have to say the words. I could see the ugly white tangle for myself. My first words were not fit for publication. "Can you biopsy it now?" I asked, and minutes later a large needle was boring into the center of the mass.



Kelly Shanahan

I didn't wait for confirmation that it was indeed cancer before I arranged to be seen at the Carol F. Buck Breast Cancer Center at UC San Francisco. My husband told me to be optimistic, that it might not be cancer. But he's a glass half full person and I knew in my heart I wasn't that lucky. I also already knew what I would do – bilateral mastectomy. I didn't have time to have post-lumpectomy radiation and I didn't want

the sword of Damocles hanging over my head, worrying about a recurrence.

My mind made up before I even saw the breast cancer specialist at UCSF, I had only one difficult chore: telling our then 9-year-old daughter. That was the hardest thing I've ever done. She looked me straight in the eye and asked if I was going to die. I told her yes, eventually, but not from breast cancer because I was going to kick its ass. That got a little smile, and a request for 25 cents for swearing.

There is nothing like having a child to make one fight – nothing, not breast cancer for sure – was going to keep me from seeing my daughter grow up.

Surgery wasn't scary for me, probably because I am a surgeon myself and cutting bad stuff out was natural for me. I didn't, however, plan on having a positive lymph node and having to go through chemo. I planned on having the surgery and getting back to my life four weeks later.

Well, four months of chemo intervened, with the stereotypical hair loss and vomiting, but heck, there was a silver lining – didn't have to shave my legs all summer and I lost 50 pounds pretty darn quick. You have to have a sense of humor and find some good in order to survive chemo.

It has been four years now and sometimes I forget I have had breast cancer. The scars are long healed, and my surgeons did such a good job that I look normal. But in the back of my mind there is always that reminder of my mortality, that if my cancer had gone undetected much longer, the outcome would not nearly be so good, that I might not be arguing with my now almost 14 year old about the length of her shorts or the need to do homework.

October is breast cancer awareness month, a time when cereal boxes wear pink ribbons. If this helps to raise more money for research in how to fight this disease, then I will happily eat

pink cornflakes. If one woman gets a mammo because of reading this article, then everything I went through is worth it.

Kelly Shanahan is a South Lake Tahoe medical doctor, gynecologist, mom, and breast cancer survivor.