

Rita's Story



Towards the end of 2015 I wasn't feeling well and initially I thought it was because of the busyness of Term 4 in Kindy. I went to my GP several times saying I was so tired, sleep was interrupted and restless, my legs were always aching and I generally felt unwell. I struggled through our Kindy Christmas Concert but missed our Kindy Fun Day, something that I had never missed in over 20 years of teaching. I rested over the holidays, but I still felt the same. I began to feel really silly going to my GP with the same symptoms.

I was away in Melbourne for a conference the beginning of March and as I was showering felt a little lump, I really didn't think anything of it but thought I would go to the GP for a check when I got back. I made an appointment and the following week I had an appointment with a different GP as my doctor was fully booked. As Dr Miriam examined my breasts, she found the little lump I had felt and sent me for a mammogram and ultrasound. I made the appointment for the first Monday of the school holidays, which was two weeks away.

I went off to have the tests and followed the normal routine, thinking nothing of the radiographer carefully ultra-sounding my left breast as I have dense breast tissue. A few days later the Doctor's Surgery called to say I needed to come in for an appointment to discuss my results. I went in and was told I needed a Fine Needle Aspiration (FNA) of my left breast as there was a lump they needed to check. The FNA was booked for the following Friday and we had already booked a few days away, so I really didn't want to think about it or worry until I needed too. I didn't want Dean (my husband) or girls, Hannah and Ellie worrying about it. Dean and I went off to have the FNA, that is when it really hit me, Dean was very nervous and I could see he was worrying. We had to wait five days because of the Anzac Day long weekend, so the results would be at the GP Wednesday morning and the appointment booked for that afternoon.

Ellie was representing the school at the Anzac Day Service and a girlfriend was there. She came up to me and asked if I was okay, she had a dream about me that I wasn't well. I hadn't told many people what was going on, but I told her that I had some tests and was waiting for some results.

Wednesday morning, I was at work when the receptionist rang to say I needed to come in for an appointment straight away. I explained I was already booked in and would be there at 2pm. I rang Dean straight away and said the Doctor's Surgery had rung and asked me to come in when we



already had an appointment so it must be bad. He tried to reassure me and say they probably didn't notice we had already booked in.

I had a Professional Development Session booked for our staff so I set-up, everything was ready in case the doctor was running late. Dean picked me up from work and we went to the appointment, we sat there in disbelief as Dr Miriam told us the results. I had breast cancer, stage three and it had leaked through my left breast duct . . . the rest was a bit of a blur . . . I was going to see a breast surgeon and we would go from there. Dr Miriam was so beautiful, as we all sat there with tears in our eyes. Dean dropped me back at work and I went in to see my Assistant Principal, Lisa to tell her the news and that I needed to go home, Dean was going to pack -up at work and meet me at home. I knew how hard this was for Lisa, she had gone through her son losing his leg due to cancer, we had a work colleague and friend, Sonia pass away from breast cancer and another colleague and friend just finish her treatment the previous year. I left work and went home to tell my mum and our girls. Their faces said it all, tears and disbelief. My girlfriends from work drove straight over once the staff had been told the news and within an hour our house was filled with our family and friends. Dean let our close friends know and the next day we all stayed home to process what was about to happen and what we needed to do. Our house was filled with different family members, our close friends and the girls school friends and their mums.

I knew I had the most amazing support network around me and our family, it would be a bit of a struggle but with so many people around us, we would get through it. The journey began . . . Monday morning I met my Breast Surgeon, a beautiful lady, who would perform the mastectomy the following week. Dean and I met with a breast care nurse, who helped us understand what was happening and kept reassuring us. I had my first surgery on 8 May, the day after Mother's Day and the day after we walked as a family in the Mother's Day Classic. The surgery was to remove my left breast and some lymph nodes. I felt very calm going in for my surgery, I had Dean, my sister-in-law, Linda by my side, three of our close friends came in to distract us as we waited for surgery. I came out feeling a bit sore and drowsy, but didn't remember much. After a couple of days, I was home and recovering, a constant flow of family and friends showing their love and support. Hannah and Ellie were at school being cared for and supported by their friends, their families and school communities.

I went for my follow-up check-up and results. My Breast Surgeon said we needed to have a second surgery to remove more lymph nodes as it had spread. She explained that I would be having a team look after me, I would be under the care of Professor Arlene Chan and she would be seeing me after my surgery to explain my treatment. The second surgery was completed on the 23 May, and the recovery began all over again. I can't remember when I was told I was HER2 positive, I never knew there was over 34 types of breast cancer. I had work colleagues and girlfriends diagnosed with breast cancer, some had lumpectomies, others mastectomies, some chemo and radiation. Everyone was different and every treatment schedule had been different, I knew then that we all have a different pathway, a different reaction to treatment and that the most important thing I had to do was fight, stay strong, positive and moving for Dean, Hannah, Ellie, my family and friends.

My first appointment with Arlene was a big relief, I walked into her office and saw this 'little pocket rocket' with a reassuring smile and I knew I was in the best care. I had heard so much about Arlene,



how she works tirelessly for her patients and every spare minute is spent on research. I remember Dean and I sitting and listening to every word, my brother Art, writing everything down so we could process it all later. My treatment schedule was set and the chemo began- 4 rounds of doxorubicin, the red devil and 4 rounds of the paclitaxel, Herceptin treatment for 12 months.

The treatment schedule and appointments with Arlene for the next three months were finalised. My last big chemo was on my birthday and Arlene was going to reschedule it, but I said to keep it because it was the best birthday gift to know I would finish my big treatment and only have Herceptin for the following 11 months. Arlene told me not to Google anything, just to follow what she said and the medication plan, which she explained to me each appointment patiently as I would get confused. I followed her advice to keep busy and working, exercise each day, even if it was a little walk. I couldn't teach but I continued to plan, program and prepare resources for my Kindy class and carried out my role as the Early Childhood Co-ordinator off-site, and later in my office at school when I felt well enough.

As a patient you know that you become part of Arlene's work family, from the CEO to the administration staff, research staff and nursing team, I was surrounded by the best medical team. The waiting room became a meeting place, I met the most beautiful people and shared their stories. Arlene would say she knew when I was in the waiting room because she would hear me laughing. The chemo ward was full of the most amazing staff, nursing staff, receptionists and nursing staff, every one of them meeting you with a warm smile, asking how you were and helping to pass away the treatment time. After my second round of chemo I had a port which made my treatment so much easier as I was running out of veins to use.

A girlfriend who had breast cancer before me said that each day I had to get up during treatment, if I was struggling to get in the shower and cry, look in the mirror and tell cancer where to go. That is exactly what I did, I would get up, help get the girls off to school with my mum and Dean. If I was feeling unwell from treatment, once they left, I would curl back into bed to rest. I always made sure I showered and was changed, sitting in the family room waiting for them to come home. I knew I was one of the lucky ones, I would make myself do things and get moving, some days slower than others but the key was to keep going and stay positive.

I didn't worry about losing my hair, eyebrows and eyelashes because I knew this was all part of the journey. I had a bedroom door covered in inspirational cards and quotes from family and friends. I would wake up to these and knew I had to fight, something not everyone has the chance to do. My neighbour would send a message telling me to go to my door and there waiting would be beautiful flowers from her garden to brighten my day. I would meet girlfriends for little walks when I was feeling well enough.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, our girls have always been surrounded by the most amazing village of family and friends, this village surrounded our family with so much love and support. Everyone telling me I had to focus on getting better and that they would all look after Dean and the girls. My wonderful girlfriends organised 'meal train', snacks for the girls lunch boxes, school drop-offs and pick-ups, netball training, checking in on my mum and keeping me company and positive when I was at home or having treatment. Dean works in the electrical industry and the



support we had was amazing, I always knew Dean was being looked after and could continue to do his job because of his amazing support network. When he travelled for work, he had a great group of guys with him, who would text and let me know he was okay and always rang, messaged or popped in to check on me. I never went to any treatments alone, my girlfriend would drive up from Waroona most chemo days to keep me company and entertained, my family, friends and work colleagues scheduled who was with me at treatments.

I celebrated my 48th birthday on the ward, surrounded by my family, a few close friends and the beautiful staff. I came home to an amazing banner made by Ellie's friends and their families that covered our fence celebrating my birthday and last day of 'big chemo'. This still remains as part of my Facebook profile as it reminds me how lucky I am and what an amazing support network I have. I went on to have my 25 days of radiation therapy with a Radiation Oncologist, who told me from the very beginning she was going to blast the surrounding areas and her warm smile was reassuring. I thought this was going to be easy, the process was easy, but it was so exhausting and I suffered with burns and infections that were painful, requiring changing at the hospital and several times a day. But I got through it and made a new group of friends, part of our routine was catching up and celebrating when someone finished their treatment. I will always remember this beautiful man who sadly passed away, we had our radiation and chemo treatments together. The photo we have together and with his daughter is something I will always treasure. I still remain in contact with his daughter who returned to England after his passing. I finished my last Herceptin treatment on the 19 August, a day filled with mixed emotions. I was leaving my safety net and the gorgeous staff, once again it was time to celebrate with the staff with afternoon tea. It was only a small token to show our gratitude and appreciation.

Once I finished my treatment and my appointments with Arlene were moved initially to 3 months, to 6 months, and to finally yearly check-ups I felt nervous, I wanted to see her more than this. The on-going appointments were my safety net and part of my routine, that's how I knew I was getting better and going to be okay. When I said this to Arlene when she first said she would see me in three months, she gave me a reassuring smile and said in 5 years time she would be giving me the biggest hug.

I realised that I had finished this treatment chapter and that I needed to start the recovery chapter, adjusting to my new normal, adapting to the impact on my body and the changes to not only me, but my family. I have learnt to adapt to my new body, I forget things so I have notes everywhere and reminders on my phone. I still can't feel the tips of my fingers or toes, so I walk carefully up and down stairs, have worked out how to open plastic sleeves and bags and the bonus is if someone steps on my toes or a child rides over my toes with their bike or scooter I don't feel it. I am trying to cope with the on-going hot flushes . . . which must be near the end because I started menopause in August 2016 . . . a little gift from chemo.

Cancer impacts everyone around you and changes your lives forever, the impact is emotional, physical and financial. Everything happens for a reason, the good and the bad, sometimes it is so unfair and other times you just need to suck it up. I chose to suck it up because my outcome was so much more positive than others. It showed me how blessed I really am, I have the unconditional love



and support of Dean, Hannah, Ellie, our family and friends. I was cared for and continue to be cared for by the most wonderful medical team, who work tirelessly for their patients and to find a cure.

Some people go through with little or no support, we need to raise awareness, find a cure and support those having treatment. BCRC-WA has been working tirelessly, the breast care nurses and psychologist on-site are providing such wonderful support to patients and their families. I can never repay the medical staff for what they have done for me, but continue to support and raise money. We held a fundraiser 'Shave 2B Charitable' in 2017 to show our appreciation and support for BCRC-WA and the plan is to have 'Old Fashioned Cake Stalls' in 2020 to raise awareness and money so that the great work continues and we can cure this disease.