A survivor’s voice by Michelle Allen

Last spring the Breast Cancer Survivorship Forum brought survivors together from different age groups, stages of treatment and diagnosis. We each bravely shared our stories including our unique history, understanding and management of our disease, and we identified similarities and common challenges. This gave me an overwhelming sense for the first time that there were others facing similar struggles as mine. It was here I first heard of the program Caring Connections which has since helped transform my life physically, emotionally and spiritually. I left the forum with a new spark of interest, of what may be out there to help me navigate the confusion and anxiety of life after Cancer. Through the Advisory Board I have been given the opportunity to continue giving our experiences purpose. I feel grateful to participate in building new routines and improvements and that people have come together willing to put in the effort to create change.

The intention of our work is to focus on meeting the educational, emotional and practical needs of those diagnosed with Breast Cancer. We are passionate about education, want to share information more effectively and find healing through supporting others. Our purpose is to provide education so that people can feel more confident in their decisions. We want to share what helped and healed us, in order to inspire and provide motivation and we want to highlight and create easier access to resources. We wish for our accomplishments to cultivate hope and for our challenges to show other survivors they are not alone. We are working to build a community, where through research, discussion, collaboration and sharing of information, families do not feel lost and no one facing this personal and complicated diagnosis feels forgotten. Our goals are led by compassion and empathy and consist of a focus on progress, advocacy and promoting the idea that Breast Cancer patients can do more than survive, but truly live, and live full, healthy and successful lives.

Reaching out to you: the breast cancer survivor

Welcome to the first newsletter for any and all who are surviving breast cancer. The idea for this newsletter came from YOU at the time of a survivorship forum held in May 2018. For a long time, I have wanted to create a breast cancer survivorship program. The forum and the development of a breast cancer advisory board have been the first steps toward that goal. I have been in practice in this area for nearly 25 years. Throughout that time, my focus has been the care and treatment of patients with breast cancer. With the help of many, we have gradually built the elements of a nearly full-service breast cancer diagnostic and treatment center. One crucial piece has been a survivorship program.

This newsletter is created by survivors for survivors, and reflects the efforts of the newly established patient advisory board which includes patients, professionals from Northern Light Cancer Care, and from Caring Connections at the Bangor YMCA. In it, we hope to share medical information, clinical trials, and information about educational opportunities and community events. In addition, there will be helpful information for families and others breast cancer survivor supporters at home and in the community.

Please take the opportunity to let us know which sections you find most helpful or if you have suggestions for new sections or topics for us to include. We expect this newsletter to evolve and improve over time with your help and our efforts, so please share your feedback.
Breast Cancer Weight Loss Study
Are you a patient with breast cancer interested in a weight loss program? You may be eligible to participate if you have:

• Been diagnosed with stage II to III breast cancer within the last 14 months.
• Completed surgery and chemotherapy, if applicable

To learn more, call 207.973.5581 or visit northernlighthealth.org/cancer

Alliance Clinical Trials for Oncology A011401

Helpful hint: adjust your view by Gert Nesin
I still remember clearly the day Dr. Garrett told me I was looking at 14 months of regular chemotherapy and immunotherapy, and the eternity that seemed. At the beginning of my 37 days of radiation, it also seemed like that would be forever. As I learned, the 14-month and 37-day views were not helpful to my daily ability to push through and thrive. I had to adjust my view to the events of the week, the day, and even the moment.

If you are feeling overwhelmed at the whole course of treatment, focus on what you feel you can achieve right now. The first time they accessed my port, my goal was to just get through that short and simple procedure. I felt such relief at having achieved it, and then immediately set my next goal of getting through the first treatment. With the gentle care of my chemotherapy nurse, my water bottle, and the magic warming blankets, I made it through. As I got comfortable with needles and the routine of treatment, I could set my goals on longer periods of time—a cycle of treatment, the end of chemo, a week of radiation. I could even occasionally look to 14 months, ticking off the time and goals one day at a time. If you can adjust your view to what you feel you can handle, it can relieve much of the stress and anxiety.

Even now, I keep my sights on the next test or the next visit, rather than my lifetime. A normal mammogram, a clean blood test, an okay from Dr. Garrett—those are the milestones I live by as a survivor. Not one day goes by that I don’t think about my cancer at least a few times. But that’s not my view. My view is my life, and I am grateful for one day at a time.

Breast cancer survivorship looks different for everyone by Rachel Downs
I think often times we forget that our family members are survivors as well. My spouse, children, parents, and siblings were with me through it all. My family members are also survivors. Family involvement is different for every patient. My children who were 13, 6, and 4 during my treatments were by my side while their mom was injected with poison to kill the cancer. My spouse and I felt it would be best for them to see the process. Sometimes the unknown is scarier than reality. I was certain to answer any and all questions they had throughout the process being sure to give age appropriate answers. I appreciate all the services that were available to me, the patient. We are working with the Lafayette Cancer Center to build more support and programs for family survivors. Social workers at the center can help with needs of children and partners, too.

Resource Corner
Caring Connections, a cooperative program of the Bangor Region YMCA and Northern Light Eastern Maine Medical Center provides support to women diagnosed with breast cancer. The program offers one-on-one support, accompaniment to appointments, a weekly support group, and referrals to other resources, yoga, and swimming. One of our most popular activities is our annual Breast Cancer Survivor Retreat, held at Camp Jordan on Branch Lake. It is free to Maine women who have had a breast cancer diagnosis. To find out more about Caring Connections, call 941.2808 x335 or www.caringconnectionsmaine.org.

Champion the Cure Challenge
Walk, run, or bike on August 17. Visit www.ctchallenge.org.