

Chronicles of Hope: Julie Zaveral

The Chronicles of Hope are the *real life* stories of those helped by Komen for the Cure's commitment to the care, research and understanding of breast cancer. These are their—and our—stories.

In 2004, Julie Zaveral woke up in the middle of the night with a strange sensation in her breast. As she tried to identify what it could be, she felt a lump in one breast, but not the other. She made an appointment with her primary care physician. On the day of the appointment, she and her fiancé, Alex, also found out that they had won a lottery to have their wedding at Evergreen Lake House. Julie was so ecstatic. She told her fiancé, "Today is such a great day! I'm sure it's nothing. It doesn't seem to be there anymore and I don't need to go to the doctor." Alex wasn't so sure. He insisted that Julie go. He pledged, "I'll go with you—we'll go together. We'll get it checked out."

At first, doctors didn't think there was anything for Julie to worry about, due to her age—she was 30 at the time—but they sent her for a mammogram with ultrasound, just in case. Julie was focused on her nuptials, telling herself, "I'm fine. Life is good! I'm getting married!" The mammogram didn't show anything, but the nurse proceeded with the ultrasound because it was already scheduled. Neither the nurse nor Julie thought there was anything to worry about, so the nurse was talking and engaging with Julie. Then, all of a sudden, her hands started shaking and she went into "super nurse" mode stating that sometimes the radiologist liked to come in and discuss the results. Within seconds of the nurse leaving, the radiologist entered and his first words were, "We'll do everything we can to save you." Julie was in shock.

She had a double mastectomy with immediate reconstruction. A biopsy revealed that the cancer had spread to 3 lymph nodes. Julie enrolled in a clinical trial that gave a combination of chemotherapy drugs because she recalls, "I thought it would be more chemo and might help the next person [diagnosed with breast cancer]. You never know, it could be the next best thing."

"I chose to be one of those people who becomes very knowledgeable. I wanted to know what the journey might become so I could advocate for myself."

Like other chemotherapies, the combination that Julie received on the trial was toxic and caused side effects. She had to take anti-nausea drugs and receive injections to increase her white blood cells. She developed infections in her throat and she had bone pain. During some treatments, Julie iced her fingers to avoid ruining her fingernails, but did not ice her toes. She loses her large toenails regularly and suffers from very sensitive feet to this day. By the end of treatment, Julie had received four cycles of two different kinds of chemotherapy and she took tamoxifen for five years.

When Julie found a second lump approximately one year after her tamoxifen regimen was over, doctors again discounted her suspicion, but soon found that the cancer had returned and spread.



Survivor
Julie Zaveral

Diagnosis
ER+/Metastatic

Years of Survivorship
8

"Alex is the person who is there 24/7. He's the one who sees the ups and down and has to hear about the fears. Its just amazing how strong and supportive he's been. I am so blessed!"

She underwent an oophorectomy and has monthly treatments which have been very effective in managing her cancer. Julie is not currently on a clinical trial, but if her cancer starts to progress on the current regimen she will be ready to try a new treatment.

"It's hard to make room for cancer in your life and it's an adjustment, but just try to remember that it is not a death sentence as you can live a long and full life with metastatic breast cancer and you are not alone! Let others be there for you and seek out a support system that works the best for YOU."

Julie's journey is also a love story. When she and Alex learned-before they ever got married-that they would be unable to have biological children due to the chemotherapy treatments received, she told Alex, "We don't know what life holds at this point." He was only 25 years old and she wanted him to have a full life. Alex didn't take Julie's subtle hint that it would be ok for him to go. They got married September 16,

2006 and he is, in Julie's words, "so amazing." Alex has been by Julie's side every step of the way. When they found out about Julie's recurrence, Alex wrote her a letter and told her, among other things, "we are in this together and I'm going to be by your side."

Julie is lucky to have a wonderful support system—her family is always there when she needs them. "I'm so fortunate to have all of them. God blessed me with that." Because of the support of Alex and her family, Julie feels like she can get through anything. She says she plans on living at least until she is 83 so she and Alex can celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary together.

INVOLVEMENT WITH KOMEN

Julie participated in the Race for the Cure before she was ever diagnosed. She credits Komen with teaching her to be aware. During her treatment, she read one of Nancy Brinker's books and it gave her so much hope that she began volunteering at the Denver Affiliate after she finished treatment. Soon after, Julie was hired on as the Director of Finance and Operations and was later employed by Komen Headquarters.

Julie also volunteered to attend the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Metastatic Breast Cancer Roundtable in January of 2012. She was newly diagnosed with Stage IV cancer and she remembers, "I walked in that day a little nervous because it was very new for me and I wasn't sure that I could add much value. I didn't even know if I could talk about it. I left that day feeling like I was going to live forever."

Julie was inspired to see the strength and determination of the women at the Roundtable and to hear their stories, ideas and plans. Julie feels that one valuable outcome of the meeting is that Komen "is acknowledging women with Metastatic Breast Cancer (MBC) and is trying to do something more for the lives of those with MBC and acknowledging that there is a difference."



Julie Zaverl presents her working group's ideas to women living with MBC and staff at the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Metastatic Roundtable

KOMEN'S COMMITMENT

Komen is committed to supporting those, like Julie, who are living with metastatic breast cancer. In addition to investing over **\$80 million** in metastasis research since 2006, Komen also provides [educational materials](#), [conference support](#) and Affiliate funded grants across the nation. Read about other survivors in our [Chronicles of Hope Series](#) on the Research and Scientific Programs page of Komen.org.

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