

Woman to Woman Survivor Volunteer Stories

These stories are from Woman to Woman volunteers of varied ages, cultural backgrounds, and work/family circumstances. What they have in common is a medical history of gynecologic cancer - uterine, ovarian, cervical, vaginal or vulvar, a willingness to share their stories, and the generosity to provide support to women in treatment.

Pamela Herman-Elliott

“I was diagnosed with Stage 1 Ovarian Cancer in April 2001 at the age of 40 during what was supposed to be routine surgery three months before my wedding. Shocking!! I had a right salpingo oophorectomy (removal of right ovary and fallopian tube). Finding cancer during my surgery came as a surprise so I had not discussed my wishes about having children with anyone beforehand. Since my diagnosis was stage 1 and my surgeon was told I was getting married, I did not have a complete hysterectomy during my first surgery. Ultimately, I decided that I did not want to live with the fear of recurrence and had an elective hysterectomy in July 2002, when stage 1 uterine cancer was found. Some people say I was twice-cursed, but I prefer to see it the other way. Luck was on my side two times as both cancers were found in the earliest stages, giving me a good chance at permanent remissions. Shortly after my second surgery, I started educating myself about cancers and getting involved in ovarian cancer advocacy and education including facilitating a support group, speaking to medical students and women about early detection, community outreach, and becoming a part of the Woman to Woman program. I am passionate about helping women get through their ovarian cancer journey by serving as mentor, friend, advisor and, at times, simply providing a shoulder to lean on. I was lucky, my cancers were found early. I had a loving and supportive family, work colleagues who picked up the slack when I was too sick to make it to the office, and access to the best healthcare services available. Helping other women and their families allows me to give back for my good fortune and is the most important thing I will ever do in my life. I strongly encourage women who have been diagnosed with gynecologic cancer at Mount Sinai to take advantage of the Woman to Woman program. It makes a huge difference to have someone by your side who knows exactly what you are going through because they’ve gone through it, too. You are NOT alone.”

Joyce Manheimer

Three months after recovering from breast cancer in 2001 I was diagnosed with uterine cancer. My gynecologist planned to do the surgery, but I decided to speak to friends before the operation. One of them encouraged me to get a second opinion from a gynecologic oncologist. I am so glad I did. I found out later how important it is to have a gynecologic oncologist involved in treatment. They are more experienced and trained specifically in the treatment of gynecologic cancer. My surgery was done laparoscopically. During the surgery my doctor discovered the beginning of ovary cancer. I had three primary cancers in less than two years! My treatment consisted of chemotherapy and radiation. My hair fell out and I was quite tired, but I have been free of breast cancer for seven years, and free of gynecologic cancer for five years. I became a Woman to Woman volunteer in 2004, one of the first survivors to be trained for the program. My life is very full with family, friends, travel and volunteering to support women who are now traveling the road I traveled.

Nancy Irizarry

It started with pain on my back left side. It was a small pulsing pain, which I ignored for a long time until one day (May 9th 2006) the pain was so bad that I had to go to see a doctor. My husband took me to an urgent care facility in my home town. They tried to treat me but realized it was too serious so they sent me to Horton Hospital where a sonogram revealed that I had Ovarian Cancer and a large tumor on my back that was leaning against my aorta. The doctors felt that they did not have the proper resources to handle my case which eventually led me to Mount Sinai. I was hospitalized there for a week where Dr. Chuang performed the surgery.

After surgery I had four chemotherapy treatments at an offsite facility near my home called The Hematology Oncology Center in Cornwall, New York. My treatment was on one week and off for three weeks. So every time I started to feel better I had to go back again. There were times that I had to drive myself to this facility because I didn't have anyone to go with me. Other times my mom, my sister, my son and my husband would

alternate so that I had someone with me. During the treatments I was very sick and had no desire to eat. My taste buds were numb. All I wanted was potato chips because salt was the only thing I could taste. I was very upset when I lost my hair, but felt better having it all gone after my sister came over one day and shaved my head. It was very hard time, but because of my friends and family I was able to get through it. They were the best therapy.

After the treatment, I suffered a lot of body aches. I had pains in my legs, arms and lower back for at least a year. I still suffer from these pains, but it is getting better. I also suffer from menopause and get hot sweats and disturbed sleep. I eat healthy foods and exercise every other day just to make sure I do all that is possible to help me feel better. I've been a survivor for 2 years and 2 months and I'm feeling great.