



Interview Transcript: Carol

Carol works as a health director for Long Plain First Nations. She is married and has one child.

Type of Cancer: Breast

Age at Diagnosis: 42

Year of Diagnosis: 2002

Treatment: Chemotherapy and Radiation

Therapy Date of Interview: March 2010

There were times where, I don't know if you'd call it lonely but it's... you are alone, even if your husband is there, or anybody is there. It is a kind of—it's a disease where you are alone because you deal with it your own way and then you have to work it out and work it through with yourself, first.

Introduction in Ojibway.

My name is Carol Beaulieu, and I live in Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. I'm 49 years old and I was diagnosed with breast cancer about seven years ago and no longer have it, thank goodness. That's about it; I don't know what else to say.

A cruel joke

I was laying down one day in bed, and you know how your breasts get bigger when you're pregnant? And I felt a lump on the inside of my left breast. That was probably around November. I had gotten pregnant in September and I went in for a diagnosis and they finally diagnosed me in February. So I was pregnant and had breast cancer at the same time. I think my first thought was, "What a cruel joke." You know, it was my first child and here I have this disease. And I also took care of myself, I thought, over the years. I didn't smoke, I wasn't a big drinker, I always participated in sports and tried to eat well, although I may not look it right now—I'm a bit on the heavy side. I thought, "Why is this?" But then after a couple of days I thought, "Well, what the heck? Why not me? It can happen to anybody." But now when I think about it, I guess maybe it was something that really challenged me and I always thought I was a strong person, but I just basically got stronger, I think, with all that happening in my life.

When to start chemo

The doctors wanted me to do chemo while I was pregnant and I absolutely said no. I just wasn't prepared to, being this was the only child I probably will ever have. I wasn't prepared to do that. So I said, "As soon as I have the baby, you can stick me into the machine there and I'll do it." But I said no. So, I had a lumpectomy while I was pregnant, I think I was about

four or five months pregnant during that process. And then they induced him early so he was born at eight months. And we stayed in the hospital for four days and then the week after, I started chemo. So it was immediately after he was born. So I went through the chemo, finished that and then went through radiation as well. That took about six months or so altogether. So all during his first eight months of his life, I was sort of out of it with chemo and radiation and all that.

Other people's fear

Interestingly, I lost a lot of friends during this process. They ran away or something; I'm not quite sure. I had one in particular, we'd been friends for, I don't know, 14 years... And she just walked away. She couldn't handle the fact that I may be dying. And it's never been the same since. I still talk to her but it's just never been. You almost truly find out who your friends really are. I'm not quite sure why. I guess it's the fear when you realize that somebody's going to die or you think they're going to die. So it was an interesting time for me in that way. And there were a few individuals who came back a couple of years later and said, "Well, are you OK now? Now I can talk to you because you're still alive." And I thought, "That's weird," but that's the way people are, I guess.

Losing my hair

I knew it was going to happen because they told me when I took that particular chemo and I said, "OK." Well. And then it started falling out in chunks and then I went to my hairdresser and I told her, "Just cut it off." Because otherwise I'm going to have these big chunks of hair all over. And it wasn't... I didn't find it too difficult. And I didn't like wigs so I never wore a wig, it was always a hat or just go bald. Like I was OK with going around like that. And I actually had some cute incidents. One, I used to wear a baseball cap. I pulled up to this red light one time and I had my baseball cap on and my sunglasses and I looked over and there was this young lady smiling at me, I think she thought I was a man. So I smiled at her, then I realized, "Oh, she's giving me that kind of smile." So I thought that was kind of cute, those kind of things. That happened to me a couple of times so I guess—well, maybe I might have been a goodlooking man if I'd have been a man. So that's what I... But overall the hair loss was OK and my hair came back the same way it ever was.

Traditional medicine

I also used my traditional medicine. I combined the two because I wasn't going to die no matter what, so I used Western medicine and I used traditional medicine as well just to make the fight better. I went to see a person who knows about that, this type of medicine. So I asked her and she gave me some medicine and you make it into a tea and you drink that all the time, for as long as you feel you need to. And it's more of a... and it's also the faith that you have and the belief that you have, that you believe in that medicine, plus you believe in yourself and that you're going to survive this. So it's, it's sort of like a tool to help you engage in your own fight against whatever it is that is making you ill. Like even the word itself in—my language is Ojibway, it's Matajoosh [phonetically stated]... which means worms in your body. And we know that cancer is not really worms in your body but that's how it's been translated, so it's to get rid of those bad cells, basically, and that's how—that's what this medicine is for.

Karma

Even among First Nations people they don't want to talk about it because, for us, for First Nations people, a lot of people feel it has to do with Karma: if you do bad things it's going to

come back to you down the road; cancer is one of those stigmas that go with that. It's that... you've done something horrible, you or your family did something horrible, so you're about to pay. So sometimes First Nations families will stay away from each other and they don't talk to you because you've been affected by that. So there's still that mysticism that is out there.

Life changes

Well, I've always thought I've been a strong... I'm a strong person but it really made me focus on who I really was and what I wanted to do after and with my son now. His name is Hayden, by the way. And how I would, how my life would change with him because I knew that he would probably be my only child, and it's true. I've since had a hysterectomy and can't have other children of my own. So that's what I thought I'd focus on and that's what I—it's changed my life in that way. And to be less selfish and to really look at things in a big way and how it's going to affect others and just try to be a good person and live a good life and treat everybody well. I think I do that a little bit better now than I did before, so that's what changed for me.