



## **Interview Transcript: Deborah**

Deborah lives in Montreal and has two grown daughters. After the metastasis Deborah went onto long-term disability and does a great deal of volunteer work with cancer patients.

Type of Cancer: Breast Cancer with metastasis to brachial plexus

Age at Diagnosis: 30, and a recurrence at 35 and 44

Treatment: Lumpectomy, Chemotherapy, Radiation, Mastectomy and Reconstruction

My name's Deborah Bridgeman. I was diagnosed at 30. I had breast cancer and it had spread to my lymph nodes and about four years later I had a recurrence. I went for my annual mammogram and they saw something suspicious in the same breast and they said, "but don't worry, most of the time it's just calcification." But the small percentage ended up being me, which, over the course of my 16 years, that's how it's been. I'm always in the small percentage that things happen to me, but it's all good. I roll with the punches.

### **One day at a time**

Two years ago I found a lump again, in my collarbone, just above my collarbone. Quite a big lump and hard, and it wasn't on the other side so I felt something was weird. So when the results came back it came back that it was the same cancer gene but it had metastasized to the brachial plexus. So it had spread. I did not go back to work after the third time because of the metastasis. I ended up going onto long-term disability so that's where I am now and I'm feeling... I feel fantastic, I feel great, and I just take one day at a time and when people ask me, "how are you? How's your health?" I just tell them I'm stable, I'm stable and I'm feeling great.

### **Thinking about life and death**

Because I had been so positive the first time, I thought, "wow, that's it, I've kicked this, I did it," and when it came back, it kind of hit me in the face, like, "OK, cancer can come back and it could actually kill me." I never thought that the first time. So when I did kick it the second time, and when I changed my attitude after that week and a half of kind of being really... not feeling sorry for myself but kind of like, just really sad that I was going to die. Once I realized that everybody dies, we're all going to die, why not just live until you die?

Don't waste time on being depressed or thinking about how you're going to die. It was just like, seriously, from one day to the next, my mind frame; once it changed I was fine.

### **Telling my kids**

When I was first diagnosed at 30 my daughters were seven and three; I kind of just rolled with it, I didn't really sit down and give them the talk. I kind of said, "well, you know, I've got to go to the hospital now and I've got to have surgery, they've got to take this bad thing out of my breast, now they're going to give me medication, I'm going to lose my hair." So the older one, her worst

thing was what my fear was: “Are you going to throw up, Mommy, and is it catchy?” She was afraid she was going to catch it like a flu.

And I brought them to the hospital, like I brought them for appointments. I introduced them. I remember once when I was having my radiation, going back 15 years ago, they were in the little room with the technicians, waving, while I’m on this big, giant table with this machine. So, I think them seeing it, they weren’t afraid because I was waving to them and smiling and so I don’t think they noticed the machine. They noticed me more than anything and that I was happy and that I was OK. I wasn’t scared.

### **Messing with my mind**

The first time when I was going through the chemotherapy, there were times when I was so sick, so nauseous and I felt like it was starting to play with my brain. I started feeling like “I don’t know if I’m going to get through this.” I felt so... It’s an odd feeling, it’s like you’re never going to feel good again. If you’ve ever had the stomach flu and you’re in bed for 24 hours, I mean, a good 12 hours of it, some of it you’re sleeping but the rest you’re feeling so sick and you feel, “oh my God,” you’ll never get through it. Well, this is like days and days of this. So it starts to play havoc in your mind and that, I’ll never forget. I remember, I never thought it would get to my mind the way it did.

### **Leaving work**

The first time that it happened I was begging my boss. I told her, “I want to come back, I need to come back, I need to feel normal.” Even though I was bald. I was wearing a lot of hats and scarves. I never wore a wig. I just wanted to get back to the working world. Because believe me, well, you know, if you miss a bit of time, especially in technology, I was in communications, HR, you miss a couple of months, you go on maternity leave, and you lose all the applications. You forget, everything moves so quickly, so I was really... I really wanted to get back and I went back about six or seven months after.

Second time, took quite a bit of time off but I knew I needed it for my body to recover from the surgery. But I couldn’t wait to go back. The third time, it was my doctor that told me that because of the metastasis, that I would be entitled to long-term, if I wanted. But I told him, “but I’m too young for that,” and he said, “well, it’s not really a matter of you being young or not, it’s a matter of the cancer that you have; it could come back again.” He was very open with me. And when I did decide to go on long-term, it was a big decision because I knew that I would be leaving behind a piece of me that was amazing to me because I was in the working force, I was a manager at Bell, I was doing so good, making a great pay cheque, learning so much, so I felt like, if I didn’t do that, maybe I wouldn’t be as important.

But I realized quickly that my volunteer work made me, inside, feel so much more important, so there was really a short period of time that I felt like, “did I make the right decision?” But I know I made the right decision. I’ve never been happier in all my life. Yeah, sure I miss my work buddies, but I don’t miss the work because it was really not important. It’s all important, work has to go on, but what I was doing wasn’t going to change the world. So if I can make little tiny baby changes by helping people, it’s much more important.

### **Turning cancer around**

It’s so weird because — like I’m not going to say I’m glad it happened, but if I could say, I’m

glad that it happened and I was able to take it and do something good with it. I've met a lot of people over the years, unfortunately, that are still so bitter about it. They're angry about it; they still wonder why it happened to them. I practically knew from day one why it happened to me. And so, if I could say that it happened to me because of the way I took it and twisted it around and made it work for me. And the world. Or whoever I could help out there.

So cancer did not define me, I took it and I took control of the cancer, and I still feel that way. Even if it comes back, I still feel that what I've done over the 16 years of my life, I don't know if I would have done a quarter of the stuff that I did if I hadn't gotten cancer. I might still have been in a dead-end job, maybe married to the same guy, I don't know. Who knows where I would have been and inside, maybe I would have been more damaged because I wouldn't have been able to let myself out.