

Interview Transcript: Tina

Tina works as an administration manager for Subsidized Housing for First Nations. She is married with 5 children.

Type of Cancer: Breast (Stage 2)

Age at Diagnosis: 41

Year of Diagnosis: 2002

Treatment: Two lumpectomies, Chemotherapy and Radiation Therapy

Date of Interview: March 2010

My only response to my doctor that day is, “Am I dying? Is that what you’re telling me?” And he said, “Absolutely not.” And it’s just... it was kind of a real blur. I was afraid, I was an emotional wreck, I had nobody to really talk to, I had nobody to turn to other than my husband and my children, who were my breathe of life. I was hanging on to them and hoping that I could live through them and the good Lord would say, “Yeah, she loves this family, she needs to be here.” Now, even though it’s been years, I still get emotional over this. I’m a real cry baby...

My name is Tina La Rose McNab. I was diagnosed with HER2 breast cancer at the age of 41 in my left breast. I had a lumpectomy and a year later I had another lumpectomy in the same place. I had 13 lymph nodes removed, one that was infected with it. I had four rounds of chemo and 31 rounds of radiation.

The battle

I knew it was a battle that I was going through. Everything else in my life before, I felt like I had somewhat of a control. I could go to somebody and say, “OK, I need it to stop,” and I knew how to eventually cope with that, but this one, I felt like I had no control over it at all. I couldn’t stop what was happening to me. And then I said, “OK, now let’s do this. We’ve got to do this,” and it seemed like I would will myself to get better every day. Will myself not to get sick after I had the chemo, but it was really a tiring thing. But I knew it was a battle. I knew it was a battle and I had to do it. I had to do it.

Big hair

I was the type of person—I loved big hair and I was a Tammy Faye Baker person, the more mascara I could put on the happier I was, and the bigger the hair I could get the happier I was too. So it devastated me knowing I was going to lose my hair and my eyelashes and everything, and how was I going to handle that? So anyways, started my chemo and my hair was starting to come out in clumps and my whole head was just in a lot of pain, and so my husband shaved my head and that was a very emotional thing. And that was the first and last time that anybody has seen me bald. I wore a wig and I wore a bandana. I just couldn’t... because I had that big hair thing, that was me, and all of a sudden just changing it overnight to say, “You know what? That’s just not you anymore.”

Searching for support

Talking to my doctor, I had to make him believe... I mean, he had kind of like a cold thing. I felt like I was more of a number to him and just a patient, and I was really emotional. And that's what I wanted my doctor to understand, is I'm human right now and I'm struggling inside. I had nobody to ask for support. I think if I had a support, that I could see another dark face coming in. Somebody my age coming in rather than those that were older and looked physically older in all areas. So I asked him one day, I said, "Can you please just set me up with somebody? There must be somebody that is darkskinned that is my age, that has been going through all of this." So he said, "OK, I'll set you up with somebody."

Well, the phone call that I received that evening was from an older lady that was non aboriginal and she was terminal. So I thought, "OK." And I'd always read all these negative things in what my doctor was saying to me so I called him as soon as I was able to, the next day, and I said, "OK, you quit lying to me. Am I dying? That's all that I want to know because I need to get myself prepared." He goes, "Oh heavens no, you're not, Tina, you're good, you're really good. We really believe we cut it all out of you." But I thought that his way of helping me through this wasn't very good, setting me up with somebody like that, because it really destroyed me again, set me off on a loop. Could I sleep that well that night? No, not at all.

Making a tough decision

My oncologist said to me, "Because of your age, Tina, we want to treat you very aggressively. So we're going to give you chemo and then we're going to give you radiation. Even though we feel that it's all been cut out of you, we really recommend that we should do the chemo and the radiation and I would like for you to sign up on a clinical trial." So—but then I felt really pressured with this clinical trial and I did originally sign up for it and did a lot of soul searching on that. Calling everybody that I possibly could on that, and then after three weeks I just said no, I didn't want to do it because it was really detrimental to the heart and I just didn't want to destroy any more of my body, so I didn't.

I have no regrets. I made sure that every time that I had to make a decision—because the oncologist talks to you and tells you, "OK, this is what we're going to do," you go home and you think about that. You pray about it and you think about it, you get into some closed area and meditate about that, and those thoughts come to you and then when you know your decision is right, then you can say it, to him, "No, I'm not taking that." And I really believe that I made the right decision. Even though it is the accepted drug now, for me it wasn't the accepted drug for myself. I was really concerned about my heart. Even though I have a really good heart, they tell me, I was still very concerned about it.

Going back to normal

I wanted to get back to work because that's the only thing that I've ever really known in my life, is working. I talked to my oncologist. I said, "You know what? You need to—." Because I knew they had done everything: the chemo, the radiation; I wasn't going to go into the clinical trial. And so I said, "You know what you need to do, my next step, because I need to go back to my normalcy now, you've done your part, now me, so send me back to work. He goes, "You're not ready yet, you've got to... I'm worried that you'll be a little fatigued, tired." And he said that, "Take a couple more months off." And I said, "Well, I need to, and I pushed for it and pushed for it, so I was only off for 10 months. When I did go back to work, it was only a half day for the

first month and then the next month I was back full time. But I was excited to go back to work and to me, that was like another, taking a pill, that's how I coped with it.

Moving beyond

Do I think about it every day? No, not any more. It gradually leaves. It's almost like a mourning process and that's how I like to associate it. When I was going through that I was mourning Tina, I really was, and after the pain of mourning, losing somebody, it starts subsiding after a while and gets easier and you can look at those pictures, you can look back at some of those things that you went through. I can drive by the cancer clinic now. I couldn't before. I would go all the way around someplace else so I wouldn't even look at the building. But no, I'm really good at there now.

Closing the chapter

What totally amazes me is that a lot of people can say, "You know, this is the type of cancer that I had, this is the medicine that I had," and even know the kind of chemo that they had. I know nothing of that. They gave me a whole bunch of documents and things like that to read and whatnot. And as soon as I was finished, I said, "OK, that's... I'm closing that chapter in my life." Picked it all up, I've put it—and I still can't find it, still to this day I don't know if I've thrown it out or what. But that's how I handle things. I had to accept what I was going through and then take some responsibility of myself, how can I overcome this. And then when it was done, it was done. And I was moving on. It is what it is.

How cancer changed me

I think I'm more loving now. I think I can empathize with people more and understand what they're going through. And a big struggle—because it is a big struggle when you go through this. It really is, it's not going to be an easy road but you've got to go in there, you've got to open your eyes, you've got to make sure that your mind is very aware of it, grab your support people and make sure that that journey is going to be as easy as possible to go through. It's going to be a hard journey.