



Pictured above: Hope Reynolds (left) with classmate Kathi Nevsimal-Ricci (right)

From Cancer Patient to Cancer Survivor and PT Student

By: Hope Reynolds, SPT

You have probably heard the saying “put yourself in their shoes”. When thinking about this in terms of PT patients (or future patients), it’s a reminder for a PT to practice empathy, imagining what they might feel or how they might act if they were in their patient’s situation. I might have taken this saying a little too seriously during the last year and a half.

On September 14th, 2020, I was diagnosed with a grade 3 stage 3B metastatic invasive ductal carcinoma, or in normal people terms, breast cancer that had already spread to one axillary lymph node. I was a 21-year-old collegiate athlete with no history of breast cancer in my family. Additionally, after my diagnosis, I had genetic testing done and everything came back normal.

My tumor was ER/PR+ and HER2- and, as a result, following a port placement surgery, fertility treatments (courtesy of my dad who gave me two to three shots a day for two weeks straight), and an egg retrieval surgery, my doctors chose to start my treatment with dose-dense ACT chemotherapy. After completing eight rounds of chemotherapy spanning from October 2020 through January 2021, I elected to have a double mastectomy with expander placement on February 12th, 2021. To top it all off, I received 25 doses of radiation, 5 days a week for 5 weeks straight, beginning in March and ending on April 13th, 2021. Immediately upon completing treatments, I started on my maintenance plan which includes taking anastrozole every day and receiving a shot of Lupron every 3 months until April 2031 to prevent recurrence. Since completing treatment, I’ve had two more surgeries, one to switch my expanders to implants, and one to take my port out, amounting to five surgeries in a little over a year. Additionally, I am just about to complete five months’ worth of physical therapy for right shoulder weakness and pain due to adverse effects of radiation.



So why am I sharing my story with you all?

If you read back over everything I mentioned above, you will see that it is pretty much just facts that any healthcare provider with access to my medical chart could see. But what is mentioned above is not my full story, not even close.

It does not tell you that I received my diagnosis through a phone call while I was in Michigan and my parents were in Pennsylvania, or that I missed the first two calls from the nurse because I was in the middle of a PT interview day. It does not tell you the disbelief and shock I felt when I was first diagnosed, or the immense support I have received from family, friends, teammates, and even strangers since then. It does not tell you that I had bruises going up and down both arms due to the number of blood draws, or that my dad ran out of places to put the needles into my stomach for the fertility treatments. It does describe the pain I felt after each surgery, or the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation. It does not tell you that I completed my senior year of undergrad during my treatment, states away from my best friend, or that I swam in my last ever collegiate swim meet three weeks after my double mastectomy. It does not tell you the fear, confusion, anger, exhaustion, shock, sadness, anxiety, joy, gratefulness, love, and so much more that I have felt throughout the last year and a half and continue to feel to this day as I navigate life after cancer.

I have learned over the past year and a half that a patient's medical chart does not even come close to showing us as healthcare providers what an oncology patient, or any patient, is truly going through. Therefore, as a PT, it is essential to practice empathy, putting oneself in the patient's shoes, in an attempt to gain a better understanding of what that patient might be feeling.

But I have also learned it is important to accept that empathy has limits. No matter how hard one tries, it is impossible to know exactly what another person is going through. No one will ever know exactly what I went through last year just as I will never know exactly what another cancer patient is going through. This realization is what I use to motivate me as a physical therapy student. I have wanted to be a PT since early in high school because I want to help others get back to doing what they love just as my PTs have done for me in the past and present. However, it was just recently that I decided I wanted to become an oncologic PT. I want to use what I have learned throughout my cancer journey to help those who are facing their own unique cancer story, without pretending that I know exactly what they are going through.