



Interview Transcript: Lillian

Lillian is the mother of two sons and has recently returned to college to study nutrition.

Location: Saugeen First Nation, Manitoba

Type of cancer: Breast cancer

Age at diagnosis: 37

Treatment: Mastectomy and radiation, in addition to traditional medicines

My name is Lillian Cook and I'm from Saugeen First Nation. I'm 44 years old and I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003. I'm a mother; I have two sons. When I was diagnosed my children were 10 and 14 at the time. I made the decision that I would use traditional medicines and I would drink the traditional medicines, and I chose not to go the Western way and I chose not to take the radiation that was offered to me, and trusted in our medicines.

Surgery

I had a full mastectomy on my right breast. I also had my uterus removed and one ovary and I landed up having a tummy flap and breast reconstruction, so I had that. My own tummy was what they used, they used a part of my stomach, the lower part, and they fixed it in such a way that it would look like a breast and they saved enough skin that they would form a breast, because they had to remove the whole breast. They had enough so I had a good boob (laughs), a nice breast (laughs).

Traditional medicines

I was really scared. I thought for sure, "what if it spreads?" That was my immediate thinking. And if it spreads, where's it going to go and if that happens, what are my chances? And that's where the medicine also kicks in. I started drinking the traditional medicines immediately and I put my faith in that. I had no choice. When we drink the medicines, there's a whole process to that. We just can't... a lot of people think maybe you just drink the medicines and that's it; that would be abusing it. So we don't take things for granted. Everything is ceremony, everything is sacred, everything is special. There's a process to that.

So we had to smudge, and I smudged, I had to do that, before I touched the medicine and present it, present it to the Creator and talk to the Creator and also to talk to the medicine, because the medicine has spirit, water has spirit, medicine has spirit. And I was told to be specific with the medicine, the medicine needs to hear your voice. You need to tell the medicine what to do. It knows what to do but you need to find your own voice and that was really hard. And I was told it can't just come from any old place, it has to come from a place of kindness and love, so I had to do that. And the only place I could do that was to find the love because I was in so much pain. Not pain from the aggravated tumour but the pain inside, what I was going through — that I was going to die and I was never going to see my sons again. And my

sons would be alone without me, without a mother, and I couldn't bear that. So that's what I was going through.

A difficult choice

I struggled with it: what are people going to think when I take my medicines, what are people going to think because I'm not taking chemo and radiation? Because I had seen people with cancer on the reserve, with no hair, wearing their hats, usually their toques. It's the summertime and they're wearing their toques, and I wasn't going to be one of those. And there was just that thing that my children would pay the price for my decision, and so I decided that it doesn't matter, I'm just going to put my faith in this and believe, and I honestly thought that I didn't go through everything I went through in my life... there was a reason, and that my children... My biological mother had eight children and out of eight children my mother gave away one. Not the oldest and not the middle, I was the second youngest, but out of one, and I realized right there that was put on my plate for some reason, and what am I going to do with it?

And as painful and as ugly as it was to look at everything about my past, I had no choice but to do that and I wanted to leave something good for my children if the medicines... I guess if I wasn't chosen to live. That my children would remember their mom in a good, positive way and I was going to change what little time I had with them. That was going to be different and I was going to be different for the time that I had left, and nothing was going to change that.

Talking about cancer

It is a problem that needs to be addressed and it is something that I see in my own community. People don't like to talk about cancer, they just don't. They'd rather talk about other things like alcoholism, addiction, the lack of housing, and they like to talk about diabetes. But they don't want to talk about cancer. It's so frightening, it's so dark, it's so scary. The fact that they have to do the breast self-examination. My god, I couldn't even touch myself. It was just by fluke — one day I decided to try it, you know — that I discovered that lump. And it's because, you know, you don't touch yourself. My god, that's sinful. And for goodness sake, you never look at yourself naked. And so there's a lot of that.

And I think that's why a lot of people, especially in my community, I can't speak about all the First Nations, but in mine for example, it's very difficult for people to be able to talk about because cancer is so invasive, it's so threatening, and the fact that you do have to get naked in front of a doctor. Because a lot of them too are residential school survivors and the last thing they want is to be touched. They would rather die, you know, and for me, it's just so sad, because for me, what it did for me was I was ashamed, but the minute that I had to see the plastic surgeon, there's the backdrop, he comes out with the camera and he's taking pictures of you and you've got no clothes on from the top, and you've got to touch yourself, you've got to hold your breast. I was like, "oh my god," my face was completely red. I never felt good about my body to begin with and then to expose it, it's just like — oh god — every time I had to see him I had to get undressed, good grief, but by the time I had surgery, I was in the hospital, I was so comfortable that I was flashing everybody my new breast (laughs). One of my friends said, "Look at you, you've just become a flasher."

How I've changed

I think it's changed me in a lot of ways, made me appreciate life of course, and it's brought a lot of calmness in my life and my faith, all the time, to believe in yourself. Because I never did, I

never believed in my abilities and what I could do. So I think that's how it's changed me and changed me to be a better mom, to be an active mom. I'm really active in my boys' lives, both of them. But being diagnosed with cancer, you can turn it into a positive if you want and I chose to do it that way.