



Interview Transcript: Veronica

Veronica works for the Kivalliq Inuit Association as the Lands Administrator.

Type of Cancer: Breast, grade 2

Age at Diagnosis: 42

Year of Diagnosis: 2006

Treatment: Lumpectomy followed by chemotherapy and radiation. All of her treatment was in Winnipeg, Manitoba

Date of Interview: October 2010

Introduction in Inuktituk.

My name is Veronica Tatutinee, I'm 42 years old, I live in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, and I had to travel to Winnipeg, Manitoba, for my treatments and that's, like, 1,000 miles south of here. I had eight cycles for my chemotherapy and a year of Herceptin treatments and seven weeks of radiation.

Getting the news

I received a phone call to say that it was positive and I think I was—I went numb. I was expecting the call but I didn't expect to hear it over the phone. I thought they might want to bring me in and tell me in person but I guess because they are in Winnipeg and I'm here in Rankin, they told me over the phone. I remember what time it was, I remember what day it was... I knew that I had to tell someone because I knew that I couldn't hang onto it and at the time, my common-law husband, he was ready to go on a big trip to Europe so he wasn't here, and I went to my parents' house and I told them that it was positive for breast cancer and after we had a good cry—and we did—right then and there I thought, "I'm going to fight this." Why not me? Instead of saying, "Why me and why me?" I didn't want to have that attitude. I said, "Why not me?" I have to prove that this can be beaten.

Travel

I had an option of staying in Winnipeg for four months but I didn't want to do that so I chose to do the three weeks and go for my treatment; go back home for three weeks. So I did that from November to April and then a year from that I had the Herceptin treatment every three weeks. I travelled quite a bit:

"Good afternoon ladies and gentleman, welcome to Rankin Inlet. Local time is approximately 10 minutes to 2:00 and on behalf of the entire crew we thank you very much for flying with us today; we look forward to seeing you the next time you fly. Once again welcome to Rankin Inlet

and have a pleasant day.”

They did try to get me to have treatment here one time but it was too expensive for the government to send a nurse up here. I got used to travelling and I was so happy to have an escort the whole time. It's more of a mental thing—you don't want to go through this by yourself. No matter how strong you are, it's always good to have someone right there beside you. It does get tiring because they would send us down Monday and want us to come home on the Wednesday but sometimes Bob would just change it to Thursday just so that I could just get an extra day of rest. Because once I would go to bed I would sleep that day and a half at least and then go. I would just be tired all the time.

Losing my hair

I started losing my hair right away. Right after my first treatment, I could see hair and so when I got back home I got my sister to give me a buzz cut and I was fine with that, but after more treatments my hair was just falling off, like I could just touch it and it would just be falling off, so I got her to really, right down to my scalp, cut my hair. And when I looked at myself in the mirror the first time I just started crying. I was trying to be very strong and not cry because I thought, “It's going to grow back,” but this is your hair and...it's a part of you and it was hard for the first little bit. And then I lost my eyebrows, not completely but—and then I lost my eyelashes and body hair and that was very strange. But at the same time, I didn't have to shave my legs or anything—that was the fun part. But yeah, it was very different to lose my hair.

Support

I didn't know anyone else that had breast cancer. It's like I went there, got my treatment and I went to Bob's family. So I didn't do anything. And even if I wanted to, because I didn't live there, I know there were things offered, like different nights, but because I travelled Monday, had my treatment Tuesday, went home Wednesday, I couldn't accept whatever they had offered. I don't think there's a cancer society in Nunavut. I don't know if there is in NWT; I've never tried to find out. I was so busy concentrating on my treatments, I didn't ever look elsewhere. But one of my homecare nurses told me I should start a support group here and I did try but I'm the only one with breast cancer in Rankin Inlet and at the time I didn't really know of anyone else that had cancer, and it was just hard, like it's a small town, and someone even told me that Inuit didn't do that, so I just sort of stopped trying to look and I've never tried to start it again.

Taking time

Just living one day at a time, I really didn't look to the future. I couldn't even think of what the end result would be but I just took it one day at a time and that's the only thing I could do. And looking at my family and friends, I knew that I was going to be OK because I had lots of support and I spent a lot of time alone too, when I got home, because of the chemotherapy. It makes you weak, it kills all your good cells and we didn't allow anyone to come to our house that had a cold, so I just enjoyed the time off work and just stayed home. And I thought the year would be long but it went very fast for me. Even Bob couldn't believe that I did so well without doing anything. I didn't do a whole lot but I just really enjoyed staying home and just taking the time to myself.

How cancer changed me

I never thought I would ever get cancer. Even just hearing the word cancer, it just scared me,

but when I was diagnosed that's when it's scary but you have to fight it and you have to stay positive and count your blessings and be around positive people. And I kept myself away from negative people and anytime I saw anyone crying I would sometimes just walk away or just cry with them, hug them, cry with them. I'm always an encourager in life, I encourage people to cry because I think it's good medicine. Whenever I do try to be strong I break down anyway, so I encourage people to cry and release and I think that makes you stronger too. I was always a very shy person growing up, I was scared of lots of things and I was not a very outspoken person. I was always a follower: if you told me to do it I would do it without question. But I felt like part of me is like, not a full leader but it made me a stronger person. I can do things that I never thought I could do before, and more aware, just more aware of things around me, and life is short and I try to make the best of it and it's pretty much back to normal for me.