



LINDA BRUCE – Palliative Care

My name is Linda Bruce. I'm 57 years old. I've been on a cancer journey now for two and a half years. I was diagnosed with endometrial cancer in January of 2010, so about 26 months ago.

I knew when my cancer recurred that this was not good news – being Stage 4 already, the outcomes are not sunny. And so I wasn't surprised when recurrence happened. In fact, in the back of my mind, I think I was always prepared for a recurrence. After that CAT scan where they were able to determine that I had two new tumours – along with the established one – they let me know that I had moved into the palliative stage of cancer treatment and which hit me hard at first – just hearing the word 'palliative', one associates that with end of life. It took a little bit of education on my part, and with my doctors, to be reassured that really we were looking at increasing my quality of life as long as my life is. That's where I'm at today.

Taking control

Being open and honest about where I am in my cancer journey, and where I'm going to end up on my cancer journey, has actually given me some power to drive my journey a little bit, drive my life. I've been to the cremation centre to arrange for what happens to my body after death. I've written my will. I've written my memorial service and what I want for a celebration of life. I've gone to visit the palliative care unit at the hospital and looked at a room that I may well end up in as my health deteriorates. It's been strangely empowering to do all of that to feel like I have some control. I may not have total control over when I die, or how I die, but I do have control over what I do along that journey and about how I'm going to let things happen — if I'm going to let things happen to me or if I'm going to steer the course. It wasn't sad time at all for me. I felt that having that involvement in how my journey is going to end up that it's given me the most control. I might not be able to stamp out the cancer, rip it out of me, but I can not let it control my life.

Helping my family

I'm not giving up. You know I'm hopeful that, you know, I've been given six months, but that's a ballpark figure, and I'm feeling well enough to think I can go beyond six months. I don't know how much longer it will be, and maybe it will be less than six months, but it'll be as good a life as I can live during that time. To know that I don't have to worry about my family, which is my biggest concern right now is how my family will cope when I'm gone, to take some of that burden off of them by making arrangements and having things in place is really helpful to me and helps me face my journey. We actually met with a social worker at Princess Margaret and had a family meeting. I had met with her previously and talked about my biggest fear was, you know, what happens when I'm gone. My children will be executors of my estate and how will they manage with the, you know, the selling of the house, the managing of the bills, the day-to-day coping. It was very, very reassuring for me to have this meeting and to hear them say, 'We'll be okay.' You know, 'We're going to get through this and don't worry about us, we'll manage. We'll ask for help when we need help, and we can we can do this.' It was a huge burden off my shoulders because that's the thing that I've been dreading the most. It's not dying but leaving behind the people I love to deal with my death.

Finding strength

Some people have told me, 'Oh, you're so strong', or 'You're an inspiration', or 'I don't know how you can be so optimistic, and so cheerful,' and I don't know how I can be either, but I just am. And I think that when you get into the middle of it you just deal with it and by and large most of the people I meet who are on a similar journey are just as strong and just as determined and just as optimistic as I am. It's one of those things those burdens that you don't know... the thought of having to deal with it when it's not your reality seems overwhelming, like dealing with a child who has significant disabilities. You think how can those parents do it? Well those parents just do it, because that's what they do, and that's how you cope on a day-to-day basis, and that's how you live on the day-to-day basis with a cancer diagnosis. I can go forth and make plans and live life even though I'm on this journey I can still live day-to-day. I can still wake up and feel good, or wake up and feel crappy and I'll deal with the day as it comes. You know, I might not be planning for trips for eight months from now but I can plan for trips for a month from now. And so it just takes a little bit of adjustment but you do what you do. So I guess if I look back to what I would have imagined prior to my diagnosis, is that I am stronger than I thought I would be. And I am more durable and more resilient than I had thought I would be, or that probably other people thought I would be too. And I meet strong and resilient and tough people every day.

Hope

Originally, my hope was hope for a cure, and hope to be a survivor at five years, and hope to return back to work, and hope to return to my everyday life and my everyday routine, and ...that's changed...I still am hopeful. I'm hopeful that I'll have good days. I'm hopeful that I'll have good times with friends and with family. I'm hopeful that even though I am palliative and know that my journey is going to end sooner than I would have liked it to end, that perhaps there may be a chance of some small periods of remission. I'm still actively having oral chemotherapy treatments. I'm still actively taking medications to help me feel the best I can feel each day. So even though I have a timeframe in which to work with, I'm hopeful that that can be extended – you never know, there may be a new treatment regime that we might find that might make my life a little longer. But even if it doesn't, you know, everybody's going to die. I'm being fortunate on this journey to be able to face my death in a more real and more practical way than most people do. And it's not a morbid thing at all to think about death, in fact, I think there's a lot of hope in there that, you know, what I'm going to experience is going to be the best it can be and that I can be the best experience with friends and family. And that that they will have hope of, you know, having good lives and good experiences and taking life as it comes and grasping the good things and paying attention to the small things that are great every day.