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Breast Cancer Survivor Recalls Battles For Her Life

By [Matt McGregor](#)



Courtesy Photo

Nancy Stricker

When Nancy Stricker got hit with her second diagnosis of breast cancer in 2012, 14 years after her first, she knew she needed to prepare herself for battle.

"There is a fine line between knowing that you can surrender to God's will for your life, and not being willing to surrender your life," Stricker said. "And so, I found it a fine line to walk."

Her first diagnosis was in 1998, and it was treated quickly, with surgery and radiation.

"I was extremely blessed, and I went on with my life, with no real residual effects," Stricker said. "You never really say that anybody's cancer is minor or that they come out unaffected, even if one survives."

Stricker led [Transylvania](#) Vocational Services (TVS), a social enterprise contract manufacturer in [Brevard](#) that hires people with disabilities, for 43 years.

The second diagnosis with breast cancer was on the other side, which one doctor told her was like getting "struck with lightning twice."

"It hadn't metastasized from the other side; it was new, not even the same kind of breast cancer," Stricker said.

Stricker explained that metastatic cancer is a cancer that spreads from the initial malignant growth.

"Self-examination is really important," Stricker emphasized. "I found the lump in January 2012, right after Christmas, and I had gone to the doctor for a check-up in September 2011, and there was no sign of cancer."

The doctor was alarmed, Stricker said, and she ordered a needle biopsy, a procedure in which a sample of the tumor is taken to test for malignancy.

"I was called back three days later and told it was malignant," Stricker said.

She called her daughter, Maggie, who works for the University of South [Carolina](#) School of Medicine in Greenville, S.C. and told her.

Maggie said she'd call her right back.

Stricker said Maggie texted a surgeon at the hospital, and the surgeon responded that he could see her Nancy that day, at 4 p.m., when he was done with surgery.

"That was at 1 p.m., so we drive to Greenville, the doctor ordered an MRI, and by the time we got back home to [Brevard](#), the doctor called and said, 'You need to have surgery and you need to have it soon,'" Stricker said.

They set a date for 10 days later, and during that time, Stricker said there were other preliminary tests.

"I jokingly tell people, from that point forward till I retired in June 2016, every day when I left work, I cleaned off my desk, because I just never knew how the next doctor's appointment would go," Stricker said. "One thing after another piled up with procedures, identifications, evaluations, biopsies, pathologies, leading up to the ultimate surgery, and I didn't return to work for eight months."

It was in this stage that Stricker said it is important to become an "informed patient."

"My doctor told me, 'you need to be responsible for keeping track of things yourself, making notes, keeping up with appointments, or bring someone with you who will make notes for you so that you really are informed,'" Stricker said.

The surgery this time was more complex than the first, Stricker said.

The tumor was bigger, and some lymph nodes, the immune system glands which enlarge in response to infection that may indicate cancer, had to be removed, which meant more radiation, and this time, chemotherapy.

"I didn't have that the first time," Stricker said. "I had six treatments, three weeks apart, and they told me they were going to give me the best stuff, and the worst stuff we have."

The doctors told her it was the worst stuff because it was strong, and would make her sick, but that it's the best stuff, because, as they told her, "we are going for a cure."

"And it made me really, really sick," Stricker said. "I'd be sick for about 12 to 15 days, and then I'd have a couple of good days where I'd be OK, then it would be time to do it again."

Three weeks into the chemotherapy, she said she started losing her hair.

"I laugh because they told me I would lose my hair, but I thought, 'maybe I won't,' then someone told me that everybody thinks they won't lose their hair," Stricker said.

So she sat on a stool in her bathroom as her husband Richard trimmed her hair short.

"The purpose of that was to give myself some control," Stricker said. "Silly, maybe, but in battling cancer, you learn to play games with yourself."

There were times, she said, when she thought that, because of how sick she would get from chemo, that maybe the doctors weren't telling her the whole story.

"About my third treatment in, I asked my oncologist if there were any possibility that she wasn't being totally honest with me, and that I was really going to die, and she said, 'no, you aren't going to die, we are just making you feel like you are going to die,'" Stricker said. "Then she explained to me that this is just how chemotherapy makes you feel, and that I will be OK, unless something heinous happens, like if I were to get pneumonia."

After Stricker's sixth treatment, she got pneumonia.

"I just thought, if I've come this far just to die of pneumonia, I'm going to be very mad," Stricker said. "But I got better, and I started radiation about three weeks later."

Stricker received 35 treatments of radiation.

"That means I had seven weeks, five days a week, and they don't give you a day off for good behavior," Stricker said.

Stricker explained that radiation "cleans up any rogue cancer cells" that may have escaped from the tumor or lymph nodes.

"Radiation is sneaky, because at first you don't feel like it's doing anything," Stricker said. "It literally takes longer to get undressed for the procedure than it does for them to actually do what they are doing, and it wasn't about two weeks into it that I started to get really tired," Stricker said.

By that point, Stricker said she was living with her daughter Maggie and son-in-law in Greenville because she was too tired to make it back to [Brevard](#) after the treatments.

"I have joked with people, saying, this isn't for sissies, because it takes a lot of grit," Stricker said. "Someone told me, 'cancer can take your life physically, or it can take your life because you don't have the stamina, ability or energy to fight it,' and so I felt I needed to be up for the fight."

Stricker's frontline of defense involved her faith, and humor.

"I have a quirky sense of humor, and that helped . . . it helps to laugh," Stricker said. "And I would watch old episodes of 'I Love Lucy' and 'The Little Rascals.'"

Her personal faith and friends carried her through many dark times as well, she said.

"I have a really wonderful group of eclectic friends, so there were people praying for me, practicing their own meditations, so I had my own faith and the faith of others," Stricker said. "There are ladies in my church, Brevard-Davidson River Presbyterian, who make 'prayer shawls,' and so they made me one, and it was very important to me."

Her husband, Richard, she said, was a "tremendous support," as well as her eight-pound Schnoodle (part Schnauzer/part poodle) Gracie, who kept Stricker company throughout the time.

"Gracie showed me a lot of grace," Stricker said.

Stricker said, as the process continued, she went through stages of grief, but never once asked herself, "why me?"

"That never occurred to me, because really, one in eight women get breast cancer, and so many people get other kinds of cancer," Stricker said.

According to the website <http://www.breastcancer.org>, one in eight women will develop breast cancer, and in 2017, 252,710 new cases of breast cancer are predicted to be diagnosed in women in the U.S., with 40,610 women in the U.S. expected to die in 2017 from breast cancer, "though death rates have been decreasing since 1989," according to reports.

"Nobody is really ever going to tell you that it is over, and nobody really understands why you get it in the first place, even more so why I got it twice," Stricker said.

But, over time, she started to put her life back together, and in the five years since, she said she is looking forward to the next chapter of her life, with a new grandson to add to the cast of characters.

"I feel great," Stricker said. "I feel really, really good, and I'm counting my blessings every day."

Stricker said she sees now, after the battle, that nothing is guaranteed.

"Each one of us has been given an amazing gift, and I've had a wonderful life, and that should never be taken for granted," Stricker said.

And, Stricker adds, 'have fun.'

"Pack all the fun into life that you can," she said.

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