

In This Issue

In Sickness And In Health

A Diagnosis Of Breast Cancer Challenges Husbands And Families To Express Commitment In Ways Immeasurable

By Mary Best

Photo By Scott Stiles

On October 2005, when Angie and John Aiken boarded a flight for Sonoma Valley, Calif., they never imagined the uncertainty that would accompany them back to North Carolina. A month earlier, the couple had moved from Nashville, Tenn., to Huntersville's Birkdale community. Now they were jetting off to one of the world's premier winegrowing regions to celebrate their first wedding anniversary. Sonoma provided a romantic and relaxing environment for the two exercise junkies to run, hike and savor the fruits of the valley's famous vines. However, during their vacation, Angie found a lump in her breast and told John. They agreed to have it checked out when they returned home.

Once back in Huntersville, after a battery of tests, the couple waited for a call from the doctor to fill them in on the results. Naturally upbeat and positive, they refused to believe the tests might bring bad news. Angie's age, 32 at the time, seemed to indicate that they had nothing to worry about. "We honestly didn't think about it like you might imagine," says John. "We weren't worried." But when John's standing Monday morning conference call was interrupted by Angie, they together faced the news that she did indeed have an aggressive form of breast cancer.

John says his immediate reaction to the diagnosis was one of fear, which quickly gave way to anger. "Sure, there were some tears and feelings of helplessness, but Angie and I are fighters, and I think we were just shocked that this could be happening to us," he says. The two had been through a medical scare early in their relationship, when John was diagnosed with histoplasmosis, a fungal disease that can shut down your organs. They had supported one another during that time, as John fought his way back from being gravely ill.



"I had spent enough time being sick that I knew I wasn't going to let Angie's diagnosis stand in the way of us having a future," John insists. The couple decided to use their anger and frustration as tools to fight through the invasive to-do list that was now part of their lives.

On the first of December, Angie underwent a lumpectomy, and doctors discovered she was estrogen positive, a diagnosis that increases the likelihood that breast cancer will return later in life. Armed with that knowledge, Angie opted for the most aggressive form of treatment: She

would have both breasts removed in a bilateral mastectomy and undergo chemotherapy.

A Strong Shoulder And A Ready Ear

Concentrating on the next steps and the logistics of treatment is, according to Marc Silver's book, *Breast Cancer Husband: How to Help Your Wife (and Yourself) During Diagnosis, Treatment and Beyond*, a way many men deal with their partners' breast cancer. "Logistics ... are a heck of a lot easier to deal with than emotions," Silver says.

John agrees. "Look, I've got that male perspective," he says. "I'm here to fix things, and this was something I couldn't fix." So he decided, with the help of counselors from Carolinas Medical Center's Blumenthal Cancer Center, to work alongside Angie in dealing with the uncertainties of the treatment ahead. "Angie and I are both very strong people," he says. "We power through things, and that's what we decided we would do here."

For Angie, knowing she had the support of her husband was what she calls "an amazing blessing. John's immediate willingness to seek counseling with me just made such a difference in our ability to cope," she says.

Angie's mastectomy, performed on New Year's Day, was followed by chemotherapy. Like many cancer patients, she worried about losing her hair. In a show of solidarity and love, John, along with Angie's father, joined her in shaving their heads before she even began chemotherapy. "Seeing myself bald reminds me that I'm thankful she survived. I liked it so much, I left my hair that way," John says.

Leaning on friends, loved ones (and even beloved pets) can ease the burden on a couple dealing with cancer, as well. John says a faithful companion throughout Angie's treatment was Daisy, one of their two pit bulls. "Daisy would curl up with Angie and stay right next to her. It was like she knew Angie didn't feel well. Angie always says, 'I don't know what we would have done without her,' " he says.

Angie and John's family and friends stepped in to provide support. Her mother traveled from Tennessee several times, as did her father and stepmother, who live in Kernersville. "Either her dad or I went with her to every doctor's appointment," John says. "I think that's one of the most important things you can do. Make sure you are there every step of the way — every treatment."

And "being there" took on a whole new meaning for John, as Angie's doctor visits rolled out in front of them. "One mistake I made early on," John says, "was not giving Angie 100 percent of my attention to talk or cry while we were waiting to see the doctor or after the appointment was over. I was either working on my BlackBerry or on my cell returning calls."

Once Angie expressed disappointment with his focus on work during doctor visits, John let his work team know he was unavailable during appointments. "There were only a few times I needed to say, 'Hey look, I need more from you here,' " she says. "But John always listened to me. We've grown so much on this journey together."

The Longest Mile

As Angie's treatment continued, the couple faced frustration and exhaustion. John, a manager of two sales forces at Unisource, was busy with his career. After her surgery, Angie took five weeks' leave from her food service sales position at Kraft, but she had decided to work through her chemotherapy. And, as is the case with many couples facing breast cancer together, the seemingly non-stop schedule of appointments and constant flow of information can be overwhelming. "So much information was coming at me at one time, and I felt like our lives were turned upside down," John says. "It's always in front of you; you can never get away from it."

Working with CMC's Blumenthal Cancer Center counselor Meg Turner helped the couple pace themselves emotionally so they would be better equipped to deal with the treatment. "Meg knew it would wear on us," John says. "And it sure did."

So Angie and John tried to do what felt good along the way. "We would do whatever she wanted to do, whatever made her feel good — go for a motorcycle ride or a run," John says. "We communicated to each other how we felt."

John explains that Angie's body image was negatively impacted by the mastectomy, making intimacy more difficult for her. "I know that's temporary," he says. "You have to put those things aside for a while. My wife is a beautiful woman, and I can't imagine life without her."

Two years have passed since Angie and John's Sonoma vacation. This October, they are staying home — and helping other breast cancer survivors. Now cancer-free, Angie serves on the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer survival committee, and John will help man the co-survivors' tent during the 2007 Komen Charlotte Race for the Cure on October 6. Both are training to run in the National Marathon to Fight Breast Cancer in Jacksonville, Fla., on Feb. 17, 2008.

Angie and John have already completed one of life's most arduous marathons. Running 26.22 miles should be a breeze.

Acts Of Love

Like Angie and John Aiken, hundreds of thousands of families face the capriciousness of breast cancer and live with the ravages of its treatment. According to the American Cancer Society, an estimated 178,480 new cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed in the United States in 2007. Tragically, 40,460 women are not expected to live to ring in 2008. Women (and men) fighting breast cancer, however, don't suffer in a vacuum. According to the American Society of Clinical Oncology, "Cancer occurs in the context of a family."

Not surprisingly, men and women have different ways of showing support of a loved one diagnosed with breast cancer. "There was a pattern I saw from the men, when they learned I had breast cancer," says J.P. Hamel, a writer and breast cancer survivor. "Unlike women, who came right out and described their feelings, men seemed unable to say anything without varying degrees of difficulty. By their presence and actions, rather than by words, I knew they were trying to support me, to do, or say or be the right thing. They were bearing witness."

Such is the case of Charlotte's Patricia and Clifford Skinner. Having first met in elementary school in New York, the Skinners are now in their 49th year of marriage. In addition to surviving several serious medical conditions, in 2005, Patricia was diagnosed with breast cancer and began chemotherapy.

"I went through it very well with the help of my husband," Patricia says softly. "He does everything for me, from the minute I get up until the minute I go to bed. I think it's taken a bigger toll on Clifford than it has me."

"I think I'm still in shock," Clifford adds. "Every time I look at her and see only one breast, it brings me to reality."

A few years ago, Patricia underwent surgeries on her heart, chest and stomach. "I took care of her at home," Clifford says. "I don't know how I did it. I know we prayed a lot. Then came the breast cancer. She was always the leader; everyone would come to her. Then all of a sudden she was on her back. I almost lost her.

"She was cancer-free, but now she has three nodules," he says, "and her immune system is weak. She has chemo two weeks in a row, and then she has a week off.

"We talk about things every once in a while," he continues, "but I've always been kind of a loner, and I didn't have anyone to lean on. But I took care of her."

Clifford offers the following advice to husbands and partners: "Stay strong. There is no time for weakness. Have your moments, then bounce

back because they need you. Help take away their pain." Within the dynamic of this family, that's the gift he offers.

Family Matters

Learning To Communicate With Children In A Family Dealing With Breast Cancer Is Vital To The Well-Being Of The Family

Among the many difficult conversations a woman with breast cancer faces is telling her children about her illness. In fact, a recent study in the British Medical Journal found that only slightly more than half of children were told their mothers had cancer at the time of their surgeries.

When Jeannette and Jimmy Ellington found out she had breast cancer in 1974, the couple tried hard to maintain a sense of normalcy for their three boys. After finding a marble-like knot in her breast, Jeannette, now of Sunset Beach, underwent a radical mastectomy and endured 24 months of chemotherapy and treatment.

The Ellingtons' oldest son, James, was a sophomore in high school when his mother learned she had breast cancer. "I remember my mom being sick from the chemo and going to the hospital," says James, now 49. "But I don't really remember very much. My parents told my two younger brothers and me the basics of what was happening, but they really shielded us because they didn't want us to worry. They didn't dwell on it."

"I didn't want them to worry; they were just boys," Jeannette explains. "I remember I would get up, get the boys ready for school, cook breakfast, and once they left, I would go back to bed. Gosh, I was so sick. Then, I'd set the alarm clock a little while before they got home from school, get up, dress, put on my makeup and be cooking dinner when they walked in."

Breast cancer changes relationships, goals and priorities — even for busy moms. So addressing concerns about the uncertainties of diagnosis and treatment with children is difficult.

Mothers instinctively protect their children — hoping to alleviate uncertainty in their lives. Learning to communicate with children in a family dealing with breast cancer is vital to the well-being of a family. Being open with children and encouraging them to ask questions goes a long way in providing the comfort they need. TCW

Join Aiken's Top Three

As John Aiken's wife was treated for breast cancer, he chose to "lace up his shoes" and fight alongside her. Here are his tips for husbands whose wives have been diagnosed:

1. Get yourself a copy of Marc Silver's book, *Breast Cancer Husband: How to Help Your Wife (and Yourself) During Diagnosis, Treatment and Beyond*.
2. Lock yourself into a support group. Don't be afraid to ask for help and seek counseling.
3. Communicate! Ask your wife what she needs and wants from you, and be willing to follow through on that.

Support Report

The greater Charlotte area offers support groups and organizations for breast cancer patients, survivors, family members, friends and caregivers. Among them are:

Blumenthal Cancer Center
Carolinas Medical Center
1025 Morehead Medical Dr.
704/355-2884
www.carolinashealthcare.org/services/cancer

Buddy Kemp Caring House
Presbyterian Healthcare
242 Colonial Ave.
704/384-5223
www.presbyterian.org/buddykemp

Presbyterian Cancer Center
Presbyterian Healthcare
200 Hawthorne Ln.
704/384-4750
www.presbyterian.org/health_services/cancer_center/index.html

Susan G. Komen For The Cure
505 East Blvd. # 101
704/347-8181
www.komencharlotte.org

Honey Do List

When a loved one is diagnosed with breast cancer, what can her life partner, family and friends do to help?

"Be there for your spouse or partner," advises Debbie Johnson, case manager for Presbyterian's Buddy Kemp Caring House, a community cancer support center. "Support manifests itself on many levels because breast cancer is not only a medical issue, but a psychological and emotional one, as well. A show of support could be a hug or a smile, or in the midst of treatment, it may be to ease her anxiety or take care of her when she's sick."

Johnson also emphasizes that caregivers need to seek out support. "Cancer is an independent journey," she says. "People need different kinds of support at different times. Some people need support outside their families, through such means as support groups, individual counseling, churches and educational programs. It is so important to have support systems in place for both patient and caregiver."

Realize this is not "her" disease; it is yours, together, as a couple, Johnson continues. For partners, the fear of losing a loved one can be overwhelming. It's difficult to see someone you love suffering and knowing you can't take away the pain.

The cancer survivor support group Breastfriends (www.breastfriends.com) recommends listening to your loved one without making judgments or trying to "fix" everything. Sometimes, an open ear or a shoulder to lean on can be good medicine.

Another online support group, Men Against Breast Cancer (www.menagainstbreastcancer.org), suggests keeping up with and attending all medical appointments and treatments. Serve as your loved one's advocate during doctor visits. Take copious notes during medical appointments, and educate yourself about treatments, physicians and alternatives.

On the home front, take on the challenge by tending to household matters — keep the house clean, the laundry washed and the finances in order. Enlist the help of friends and family, who usually want to find a way to help but often don't know what to do. Don't be afraid to tell them!

Because early detection increases a woman's chance of surviving breast cancer exponentially, a loved one can encourage regular mammograms, as recommended by her doctor, and monthly breast self-exams.

Maintain a sense of humor, when appropriate. As comedian Victor Borge once observed, "Laughter is the closest distance between two people."

Show affection. Hug and kiss her; caress her arms, hands, legs and feet; give her a massage. Reassure her that you find her attractive, and find ways to be intimate other than through traditional sexual relations.

Remember these words of wisdom found at breastfriends.com: "Keep telling her you love her, and that you aren't going anywhere. She might test that love at times, but make sure you communicate with words and deeds."

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