

MY STORY

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You never know what's around the corner. On February 6, 2011, I went on a 19 km training run in preparation for my first half marathon. The next day I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Thankfully, my cancer was diagnosed through the Gattuso Rapid Diagnostic Centre at Princess Margaret Hospital and, in my opinion, they saved my life. Their willingness to push the boundaries meant that my cancer was detected at an early stage. And their vast research, knowledge and expertise have given me both direction and hope as I navigate my way to a new normal.

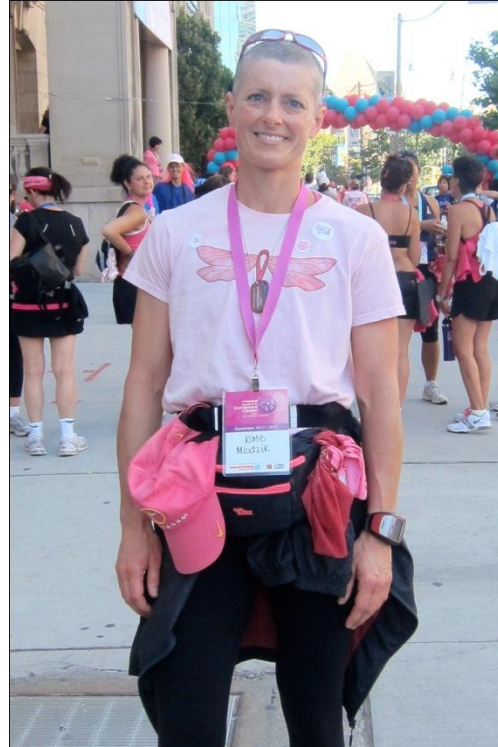
At 42, life was moving along just as planned, but by the end of last summer I had a nagging pain in my left breast that just didn't go away. No lumps, just a pain. My family doctor ordered a mammogram and the results of that test showed a lesion which wasn't there on my last mammogram. He followed up by ordering an ultrasound.

In the meantime, I had lunch with a girlfriend whose best friend was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. She said that if she could do anything differently, she would have gone through the one day diagnostic clinic at Princess Margaret Hospital. I immediately did some research and I found the Gattuso Rapid Diagnostic Centre, which was founded and led by Dr. David McCreedy.

On average, it takes 33 days from the time a woman finds a problem in her breast until she is actually diagnosed. The idea behind this centre is to alleviate that agonizingly long wait and move onto treatment more quickly. All in one day, a patient receives a consultation, a biopsy, a diagnosis and a treatment plan.

I thought the idea was brilliant, so I did a little more research and found that PMH was the top cancer research facility in Canada and their reputation was world renown. So I thought to myself, "If I'm taking this journey, that's where I'm going." My family doctor referred me immediately.

While I was waiting for the PMH appointment, I continued to have the ultrasound which my family doctor had ordered. My results were reviewed immediately by the radiologist and he alleviated my



fears when he told me that I had a cluster of benign fluid filled cysts – very common and nothing to worry about. A huge wave of relief washed over me.

Within a few days, the nurse from my doctor's office called to let me know of the ultrasound results, which I already knew. I told her that I was going to cancel the appointment at PMH since I simply had benign cysts. Then she said something that changed my life path. She suggested that since I already had the appointment booked, that maybe I should just follow through with it. She went on to say, "you never know if you'll need them down the road and this way you'll have your foot in the door and know a bit about their process." So, on her advice, I kept my appointment.

At the end of October, I met with Dr. Heisey, who is part of Dr. McCready's team at the PMH clinic. She reviewed my file and agreed that the images seemed to show benign cysts. She said there was a 3-5% chance that a cancer tumour was being masked by the cysts – negligible, really. There is a breast cancer history in my family, so Dr. Heisey did a calculation and figured that I had a 22% lifetime risk of developing breast cancer. The standard for a physician to order a breast MRI is a 25% risk or greater. Thankfully, Dr. Heisey took the time to ask me a few very pertinent questions: "What kind of person are you? Do you need to know as much as you can now, or can you move on with your life knowing that the risk of cancer is minute?" Well, I need to know everything now. So, even though I didn't technically qualify for an MRI, Dr. Heisey ordered it to give me some peace of mind.

My MRI was on the evening on Friday, January 28th and, still thinking that I was just finishing a process, I joked with my girlfriends that me and my breasts had a hot date with a cold MRI machine! Little did I know. I completed the exam, headed home and put it all behind me without a second thought... until the phone rang four days later.

It was Dr. Heisey and she said a few things you never want to hear from a doctor: "You should sit down. Something has shown up on your MRI. I've booked you into the one day clinic. Bring your husband. Here's my cell number if you need to talk to me." Needless to say, I was shocked. The MRI had shown two masses that were "suspicious for carcinoma" and I needed biopsies for further clarification.

Six days later, my husband and I arrived at the one day clinic and, from the moment we arrived, we received only the best, most professional and compassionate care. The nurse practitioner called me in to prep me for my biopsy and she took my personal details. When she asked me the ages of my daughters, I saw her tear up with me as I told her they were 11 and 8.

I went on to have my biopsy which was performed with extreme precision. The radiologist was hopeful that the second smaller mass was not cancer, but he didn't comment on the larger one.

I left the room sobbing as I knew in my heart that at least one of the masses was cancerous. I was quickly met by one of the PMH volunteers from heaven. She put her hand on my back and quietly said with a smile, "I've been there. I've survived breast cancer and you will too". And there it was - hope.

Later in the afternoon, we met with Dr. Heisey and she confirmed that I had invasive ductal carcinoma with two cancerous tumours. The smaller one turned out to be cancer too. With great compassion and

empathy, she consoled us, answered our questions and then introduced us to Dr. McCready. I knew that he was a very well respected and renown breast cancer oncologist. And as I said before, if I was about to embark on this journey, I was taking the top professionals with me.

He recommended a mastectomy because my tumours were located in different quadrants of the breast. In addition, he suspected that I would need chemotherapy, but probably not radiation therapy, with reconstructive surgery as an option down the road. We were devastated and through my tears, the only thing I could say was that "I just need to live".

When we asked how advanced this was and what my prognosis looked like, their answer was that they felt it had been detected early, the tumours were small, and it didn't look my lymph nodes were involved. They saw no reason why I wouldn't get through treatments and resume my life. No guarantees, but hope. We left the hospital completely deflated, but at least we had a plan.

We told our girls immediately and it was the toughest conversation of our lives, but at least we could give them the message that we've given to everybody: "Mom has breast cancer. It looks like it's been caught early. She has to have a lot of treatment, but she will be OK."

In the time before surgery, I had done some research (and even more soul searching) and decided that I wanted to have a preventative mastectomy on my other breast that was not affected by cancer. Although that was a difficult and very personal decision for me, it's one that I haven't regretted for a moment.

Two and a half weeks after diagnosis, I was in the OR for bilateral mastectomies. My surgery went off without a hitch and I recovered faster than expected, without any complications. I credit much of this to my expert surgical team.

My pathology report after surgery showed that I had a Stage 1, Grade 3 cancer, with all of the tumours being fully removed and lymph nodes clear. Although it was caught very early, it was an aggressive type of cancer and chemotherapy was recommended as a precautionary measure. I went on to do four rounds of chemo, I am on Herceptin for one year and I'll be on Tamoxifen for the next five years. As expected, no radiation therapy was required.

It's been a long road and I know that there is still a long way to go, but I feel very blessed to have the unwavering love and support of my incredible family and friends. They have given us so much and have taught our girls the importance of supporting someone in need.

I am also forever grateful to the brilliant minds and compassionate hearts at PMH. Without the MRI, that aggressive cancer would still be growing within me. They detected my cancer at an early stage, gave me exceptional, cutting-edge care and provided me with direction and hope on my journey.

I want to close by telling you about my last appointment with Dr. McCready. I was in his office, requesting a referral to a plastic surgeon for breast reconstruction, and I said to him: "When I was diagnosed, I told you I just needed to live. Now that I'm living, I just need to get on with it." We both smiled.

For me, part of “getting on with it” means raising awareness of diagnosis and treatment issues and supporting the excellent work done at PMH.

Thank you so much for letting me share my story with you and thank you for contributing to PMH’s vital work. It’s made all the difference in my life and, for that, I am very grateful.

Update: On October 23rd – the eight month anniversary of my cancer surgery – I ran my first half marathon in Niagara Falls. I’m a lifelong runner and it has become an important part of my physical and emotional recovery. My family met me at the finish line with a banner that read: “Go Kate Go! Kicking cancer’s butt, one km at a time!” I thank PMH for getting me back on the road.