



A cancer patient realizes the power of asking for help.

Learning to lean

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had hugged neighbor after neighbor before I realized, "This could have been my funeral." I knew most of the people at the wake for my neighbor, Laura, who'd passed away that weekend after privately battling ovarian cancer.

Finally, I found Laura's husband among the sea of middle-aged neighbors and sixth-grade boys, who, like my son Christopher, were their son's classmates.

"I didn't even know she was sick," I told him.

"Well, that's Laura," he said. "She felt we could handle this on our own." I got the distinct impression that he didn't exactly agree.

"We're all here for you now," I offered before retrieving my son and escaping through the crowd. In the parking lot, I searched for the words to assure my 12-year-old that I wouldn't die, that my cancer—stage 3 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma—wouldn't return after more than three years in remission. But I knew better than to make promises about cancer, which had turned our lives upside down.

A few summers ago, doctors found a tumor the size of a softball in my left lung. My oncologist estimated that it had been growing there for about eight months, back to the middle of soccer season when I still had the lung capacity to shout, "Shoot the ball!" as the coach of my sons' team.

By the time I was diagnosed with cancer, I was told I had about two months to live.

I also had a house-wide construction project underway. Our house stood naked on our street, the old siding having been ripped off and left in piles in the yard for everyone who lived in the 50-some houses past ours to witness as they drove by.

My husband, Pete, and our sons Nick and Chris and I had planned to spend our kitchen-less summer evenings enjoying burgers by the community's lake. Instead, we ended up with a head-shaving/kitchen-emptying party with a dozen family members, friends and neighbors and a Dumpster in the

The Bliss Factor

driveway. After the first round of chemo and a 10-day hospital stay, my hair was falling out into my Cheerios. We would beat chemo to the punch.

"Ready?" Pete said, his electric razor poised over my head, an orange beach towel draped over my shoulders.

"Ready," I replied, taking a deep breath. He shaved it into a mohawk before taking it all off. When I got up, my neighbor and fellow soccer coach, Dmitri, sat down in the chair.

"I'm next," he said, and the sweet gesture made me feel a little less alone. As Pete shaved off Dmitri's hair, I suggested, "How about we call our team the Bald Eagles this fall?"

"I like it," he said, and stood up to take a photo with me, the flash reflecting off our bald heads.

Then I went in the bathroom to cry.

When I was diagnosed with lymphoma, all I knew about cancer was that if you were unfortunate enough to get it, you had to be a warrior and face it with a kick-butt attitude and a yellow wristband. But what about my family? What were they supposed to do?

I spent much of the first month

after I was diagnosed in a New York City hospital room overlooking the East River. I'd lie awake after the 4 a.m. vitals check, watching the sun rise, wishing I could be home with my family. I needed to be with them, and they needed to be with me.

At night, Pete would call to chat about the new tiles in the bathroom or the new cabinets in the kitchen. Then he'd put the kids on the phone for hello's and I love you's. I'd set my cellphone on speaker and the nurses would come into the room to hear Nick play "Für Elise" on the piano while I held back sobs.

When I was back home, Pete would administer injections, designed to boost my immune system, into my thighs each night for 10 nights after chemo, while Chris played the piano, "to distract you, Mom." My family was doing what they could to help me. And so, I thought I should do what I could to help them: I called in the cavalry.

Three times a week, neighbors dropped off dinners including burgers fresh off the grill. One even cooked us lobsters, which I was determined to eat despite nausea from the chemo.

My neighbor Kim helped shuttle the boys to swim team practices and playdates, where they'd spend sunny summer afternoons eating cherry ice pops and drawing in pastel-colored chalk on sidewalks.

Others picked up my mail at the post office, dropped off prescriptions at the pharmacy and offered to mow the lawn as the grass began peeking out from under piles of wood.

Let our neighbors take care of us, so we could concentrate on taking care of each other. Because that's what real warriors do. Real warriors ask for help when they need it the most.

About a week before I finished radiation treatments in the fall, the Bald Eagles won their division. I watched Dmitri hand out first-place trophies to each of the boys on the team, including my sons, and I said a silent prayer that I would be there for many more soccer seasons ahead.

I took comfort knowing that I—and my family—had a team to support us, both on and off the field. ✖

Jen Singer is the editor in chief of ParentingWithCancer.com.



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