

COMMENTARY: LIFE LESSONS FROM A CANCER SURVIVOR

By Lauri Leadley, RPSGT, RCP

As a young child, I was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. This painful chronic disease resulted in numerous hospital visits. The love and care shown by the respiratory therapists during my treatments was both a comfort and an inspiration.

Years later, I decided to become a respiratory therapist so I could help people as I was helped as a child. I worked as an RT across several states doing inpatient hospital care and as a physician's assistant. I always enjoyed going above and beyond to help, with the patients or anything the physicians needed.

In 1990 the physician I was working for had a patient who was homebound and needed oxygen. I offered to go to her home and perform an oximetry test so that we could help this patient get the oxygen she needed.

It was then that I saw a huge need for this type of home care. I immediately began offering this service to physicians I knew. Because of their enthusiastic response, Valley Oximetry was launched.

I soon left my employment as an RT to run Valley Oximetry full-time from our home. My husband, Glenn, continued his work as a respiratory therapist but always helped me with more ideas and motivation. From the beginning we worked as a team and continue to do so today.

Just two years into our growing business in 1992, while I was pregnant with our third child, I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. We were devastated and terrified. The doctors told us that without chemotherapy I would die. However, they also warned us that chemotherapy was very dangerous and could be deadly to our unborn child. Our choices were to abort our child or take chemotherapy during the pregnancy and risk losing or severely damaging our baby.

It was the hardest decision a parent could be asked to make. It was then that I remembered a statement from our pastor, LeRoy Lawson, that changed our lives forever: "You'll never have joy in your life without taking risks." We couldn't bear the thought of aborting our

child, so with much prayer, we made the decision to go ahead with the chemotherapy.

The next few months were difficult to say the least. I went through four rounds of chemotherapy, sustained by the strength of my love for this fragile new life. On Jan. 7, 1993, we were granted a miracle as we welcomed Connor, a healthy baby boy, to our family! After that, I was ready for anything.

These are a few of the lessons that I learned from my ordeal. They have helped me get where I am today, both personally and professionally.

WRITE DOWN YOUR GOALS & VISION

During my battle with cancer, I kept a journal, writing where I'd been that day and where I wanted to go – physically, emotionally and spiritually. The daily task of documenting and accomplishing small reachable goals became exhilarating, and it encouraged me to think about my vision for the future.

I always loved the "rescue" part of respiratory therapy. I quickly saw how happy I could make a fatigued and grumpy person after initiating a night of continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) therapy. This led to an interest in sleep technology.

Frustrated with the clinical feel of the typical sleep lab, I developed a vision of a resort-like room with a fully equipped private bathroom so that the patient could get ready for work after the study. The vision included details of how I could make the patient's experience more comfortable. The ideas I recorded in the pages of my journal became the foundation for the beautiful sleep clinics I own today.

EXPECT CHANGE

Our business continued to grow, mostly by referral, and then physicians started asking if we also did sleep studies. I jumped at the opportunity for a new challenge and returned to a hospital setting to train in polysomnography.

Soon we opened our first two-bed sleep center. Within six months we had to turn the waiting room into a sleep study room.

We've learned that too many times people get stuck in what's going on right now, thinking it will last forever, good or bad. We didn't expect the chemotherapy to last forever, nor did we expect our business to grow as fast as it has. The fact is that times change and needs change.

Keep your eyes open to the changing needs in the environment

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around you and find ways to fill those needs. That's where you will find your success.

EMBRACE CHALLENGES

Sometimes you will find your greatest opportunities during the most challenging of situations. As I write this, our country is going through tough economic times. Why do some people always seem to thrive, while others seem to go down with the economic tide? Maybe it's because successful people focus on opportunities that come with a challenge.

During the cancer experience someone told us, "Your life will never be the same." I was frustrated because I just wanted to endure the chemo and get my life back. I now see that what I went through gave me the gift of a new life, new courage and new success.

BE WILLING TO TAKE RISKS

If we hadn't gone through with chemotherapy when I was pregnant, we wouldn't have had the joy of raising our son, Connor. Granted, there was risk involved, because we could have lost him. But without that risk, we would have forfeited the reward.

It is the same with business. Every business has a chance of failing. Sometimes you succeed; sometimes you don't. It's okay. Just take a risk!

SHARE YOUR IDEAS

I've learned the hard way that none of us is equipped to handle all of life's challenges on our own. It was through the loving sup-

port and care of many friends, family and even strangers that I am alive today. And the same is true with my business.

The key is to share your ideas in a way that will inspire people to want to join you. My husband, friends, family and staff are the backbone to my success, and they are all amazing people. They have taken my ideas and helped me to implement them, each adding their own special touch. I am truly grateful for all of the people in my life.

We have come a long way from working out of our home with one oximetry machine to owning four sleep diagnostic and testing facilities and being referred to more than 40,000 patients. By the end of 2010 we'll have five sleep centers with the ability to help more than 10,000 patients per year. We are truly blessed!

So...what's your challenge? Do you have a vision? Write it down; set small, reachable goals; and always have a backup plan. Look for opportunities when life throws you a curveball. Most of all, celebrate when you make a difference! ❖