

My Hero
By Joe Cox

After reading the story about Martha Thompson's battle with ovarian cancer in last week's edition and I felt compelled to tell the story of my hero.

My hero is my wife of 29 years, Martha Cox. You see we are approaching 2 important dates. One is Mother's Day, and the other is the eleventh anniversary of Martha's battle with ovarian cancer.

I will never forget the day when Martha had a doctor's appointment as a follow up to gall bladder surgery she had the previous February. She kept telling her doctor that there was something wrong and that particular day when she went to her appointment, she told the doctor she was not leaving her office until a abdominal ultrasound was performed. If you know my wife, you know how very persuasive she can be. The doctor finally did the procedure and when Martha called me, I could still hear the doctor saying in the back ground "I'm very sorry". The procedure had shown 2 large tumors, one on each ovary. I rushed to the hospital where we went through every emotion from crying to anger toward the doctor for not listening earlier. I tried to get her to leave her car at Duke and ride home with me but she just said "I'm ok, I'll meet you at home". I had to stop twice as I was crying so much I could barely see but Martha drove straight home.

The next day, we had an appointment with an oncologist who gave us a crash course on cancer. Martha has been an RN for over 35 years, 33 at Duke, but her field is in the heart center, not cancer. That was on a Friday and surgery was scheduled for the following Tuesday. It was just like you see on TV, we would not find out if it was cancer for sure nor would we know the prognosis until after the surgery. I would say that was the longest day in my life, but there have been many long ones in the last 11 years. After the surgery, the doctor met with me, my mom, and my daughter who was 14 at the time. What he told us was about as bad as it could have been. He had found the 2 tumors that showed up on the scan, plus the cancer had spread to her large intestine, spleen, small intestine, and a spot on her liver. They checked her CA 125 and with normal being 35, her's was almost 3000! He said he would give her a 25% chance of living until the end of the year. The problem was, he didn't know Martha.

After the surgery, she under went 3 months of chemotherapy then they performed another surgery just to see what was left. Great news, there was almost no cancer anywhere! Just to be safe though, they gave her another 3 months of chemo. After the end of that round of chemo her CA 125 was below 10. They told her to come back in 3 months for a checkup.

When she went for her first checkup, the cancer was back. This time, they decided to only use chemo and they implanted a port-a-cath, a small device under the skin for chemo infusions. That day we were in the recovery room coming to grips that we were in this for the long haul when we overheard another couple getting good news and I remember both of us crying but I told Martha "don't worry, we'll get our good news someday".

There has been good news over these 11 years, but there has been a fair share of bad as well. Martha has endured 12 major surgeries. Her cancer has

spread to lymph nodes which are like a highway through the body. We have lost count of the re-occurrences, and she had to have triple bypass surgery 5 years ago as chemotherapy is bad for your heart among other things. 3 years ago, after experiencing dizziness, they discovered a golf ball sized tumor in her brain. It was removed by the same surgeon that performed the surgery on Senator Ted Kennedy. The radiation after that was rough as well more chemo. We recently counted and came up with the fact that Martha has had more than 300 chemotherapy treatments!

Throughout this entire ordeal, Martha has not only worked, but she has been counseling patients that may be about to have one of the many procedures she has endured. Any time I hear of someone who has just been diagnosed with cancer, she will give them a call and say "Hey, I made it through and you can too". A lot of them didn't and we don't talk about that. We've only attended 2 funerals in the last 11 years, my mom and my aunt. We do everything we can to stay positive. I make sure to tell her "I Love You" every morning and every night as well as multiple times on weekends. I say Martha's my hero because I don't know anyone who could have been through half of what she has and not only endure, but shine like she does. She always puts everyone else's pain and problems ahead of hers and you'll never hear her complain. The patients at Duke are always commenting on the woman with the turbine (she's lost her hair permanently) coming in the room with a "Good Morning!". Duke has a program where you can donate time off to someone who doesn't have any and as much time as she has had to take off over the years, she still donates time to others if they ask. She gives to our children and just adores our 2 grandchildren. She just got home from another chemotherapy treatment tonight and is busy working on a design for a wedding cake for our daughter's upcoming wedding.

This coming Mother's Day rest assured our children will be celebrating having their mother with us and I'll make sure to tell my hero how much I love her even though I'm sure, she knows.

I wrote this in April, 2009. As of April of 2011, Martha is still battling Ovarian Cancer but we were devastated to learn Abby, our 27 year old daughter that has stood by Martha's side throughout her entire ordeal, has been diagnosed with stage 4 Breast Cancer. It is a very aggressive, very fast growing type. Martha, as I expected, put herself on the back burner to take care of her little girl.

One day in October, Martha and I went to one of her appointments as her CA 125 was rising again. Her doctor told us they had discovered another spot on her brain and they were going to start chemo immediately. As we were leaving, I called to check on Abby who was hospitalized at the time to let her know we were going to come visit. When she answered, I could tell something was wrong. She informed me she had also just been advised she had spots on her brain as well....Martha's first response was: I'll just postpone my treatments until Abby has hers. I told her that was not an option and somehow we'd find a way to get through it all.

It's now December of 2011 and we're "keeping our head above water". Martha gets chemo 5 days a week every 3 weeks. Abby gets chemo every week.

They draw strength from each other. Abby recently told her mother she has a new respect for her strength and knows first hand what she has been going through all these years. Whenever Abby tries to push herself too far, her husband calls her “MJ” (Martha Jr).

Through it all, we all realize how blessed we are. Martha could have succumbed to her disease 13 years ago and not been here to help Abby deal with hers. We have been married for over 31 years now. We have 2 children and 2 beautiful grandchildren and are a very close family. We’re looking forward to another Christmas season when we can be together to give thanks for all we have.



Martha and Abby