



Rediscovering Yourself After Cancer

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Hilde Stapleton

Patient Advocate

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Tamara Lobban-Jones:

Hilde, you talk about rediscovering yourself after cancer, not allowing the cancer to consume you. How did your journey through that?

Hilde Stapleton:

It's not an easy journey, and it's not done in one day. It takes a long time, and I think it's very important to be able to concentrate on a specific thing that makes you happy and ready to go the next day. And that was art for me. We've also done a lot of travel, and that's very inspirational. And together with the art, it's really really fantastic for me.

Tamara Lobban-Jones:

You mentioned that you struggle with survivor's guilt. What did you mean by that?

Hilde Stapleton:

I have a lot of friends that were lost to melanoma. And every time I lose one of my friends, it's like why am I here? Why didn't I go? It's really guilty, you see their family and friends. And it's hard to be left.

Tamara Lobban-Jones:

It took nearly 18 months for you to return to normal. How were you able to find that normal?

Hilde Stapleton:

First of all, you're so concerned with being a cancer patient that when someone tells you that you're cancer free, it's hard to believe. And it takes a while to sink into your brain that you actually are cancer free. For me, it was like yes, I want to do this! Yes, I want to go there! It was just always something new that I wanted to do and get inspiration to be happy again as simple as when I was in a walker I took my dog out for a walk. And I guess my neighbors thought that was kind of

crazy, but that was a good day for me to be able to take my dog for a walk.

Tamara Lobban-Jones:

Do you feel as though you're still rediscovering yourself today?

Hilde Stapleton:

Yes, you're never done, but I'm in a much better place today. And my art has a lot to do with that.

Tamara Lobban-Jones:

We can look at art as being somewhat of a therapy for you then. And with that said, we should also mention that during your recovery one of your social workers introduced you to CanCare. And now you and your husband are both counselors there. What was it like counseling others who've walked in your shoes? What has that been like for you?

Hilde Stapleton:

You know, it's my way of giving back what was given to me. And it's very rewarding to talk to these referrals that come from all over the country. The conversation is not about me. It's about them. And they know I am a survivor, so they trust me.

Tamara Lobban-Jones:

Now, Hilde, you've said repeatedly that connecting with a team of knowledgeable experts is the reason you're here today. I think you sitting on this couch speaks for itself, right?

Hilde Stapleton:

Yes, I do think it's very important for melanoma skin cancer patients when they find out that they have melanoma to find a melanoma specialist—whether it's a surgeon or oncologist. They need to be at the big cancer center.

Tamara Lobban-Jones:

Now, Hilde, you've worked with a team of experts. Dr. Marick Roth's your surgeon, Dr. Patrick Hugh your oncologist at MD Anderson, not to mention your nurses and your social workers. Tell us a little bit about that experience.

Hilde Stapleton:

They become very personal and good friends. When I was in kind of a coma for a few days after my stroke, it was Christmas Eve. My husband had gone home to let out the dogs, so my three children were sitting in the waiting room. And it was late at night, and Dr. Hugh came to check on me. And he went to the waiting room to talk to my children, and there had actually been eight doctors who said it was brain tumors. And he said no it is not brain tumors. It is something else, and it was.

Tamara Lobban-Jones:

I was able to catch up with Dr. Hugh, and I asked him to describe you in one word. And he described you as resilient. And he also had this to say: Hilde is a courageous woman who

successfully battled advanced melanoma and is an inspiration to all of us. How does that make you feel?

Hilde Stapleton:

It makes me feel very proud, and Dr. Hugh is a big part of that. He's the best doctor, and I want to give back to others what others have done for me. And that's my goal in life.

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