

Kate Landis

On finding a healthy dose of humor and giving it all you've got.

By Amy Newman

Photos courtesy of Kate Landis

When Kate Landis was diagnosed with breast cancer, she reacted the way most people newly diagnosed with cancer would - she cried.

But an hour later, she was done. Instead, Landis decided to make the best of the situation.

"If I was going on this journey, I was going to have a fun journey," Landis said. "It wasn't going to be a crappy one."

So she started a pool with family and friends. The wager? What date her hair would fall out. The prize? A bottle of wine.

Her younger brother won, correctly predicting that her hair would fall out on their older brother's birthday.

GIVE IT ALL YOU GOT

Landis' journey began in September 2009, when a small mass on the inner side of her left breast appeared on her annual mammogram. Further testing confirmed that Landis had a tumor against her chest wall that was so small doctors couldn't feel it even after they knew its exact location.

She underwent surgery in mid-October to excise the tumor, but the doctors were unable to get clear margins - meaning there was not enough normal tissue surrounding the tumor's edge. It would take two more surgeries, one at the end of October and another the first week of November, before doctors were satisfied that all of the cancer had been removed.



Kate, at the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) in Atlanta, accepting an award for her 18 years of service in the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program.

Because the tumor was caught early, Landis had the option to skip chemotherapy and go straight to radiation. But her oncologist told her to imagine herself in five years - if she skipped chemotherapy and had a recurrence, would she be able to live with herself?

Landis, who had managed a local health organization's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program grant for 13 years, knew the odds and the answer was obvious.

"You just hit it with everything you've got," she said. "And if everything isn't going to take care of it, then nothing is going to take care of it. But if you pick and choose along the way, your options might not be as good."

On Christmas Eve 2009, Landis received her first of a four-week course of chemotherapy. For one and one-half hours every month, she sat in the doctor's office as the drugs designed to kill any cancerous cells that may have spread to

other parts of her body dripped through an IV into her arm.

Landis considers herself lucky that, aside from losing her hair and an odd craving for white foods - a side effect she said even her doctor called weird - she suffered no ill effects from the chemotherapy.

Radiation, which targets the site of the tumor to insure that all cancerous cells have been killed, began in mid-

But cancer is cancer, and Landis was determined to maintain a positive attitude.

April 2010. At the end of May, only eight months following the initial mammogram, Landis completed her final radiation treatment. Tests confirmed that the cancer had not spread.

Five years later, she still takes femara, a hormone replacement therapy that decreases the amount of estrogen the body produces. The cancer has not returned.

STAYING POSITIVE

Landis is quick to point out that her cancer journey was easier than others. While her tumor was fast growing, it was the most curable because it hadn't spread to her lymph nodes. Excellent health insurance meant she never worried about paying for treatment, and her employer accommodated her in whatever she needed.

But cancer is cancer, and Landis was determined to maintain a positive attitude. In addition to an unorthodox sense of humor, she took control of whatever aspects of her health that she could. It is advice she passes on to other women.

"Don't think of it as, 'Oh, I've got breast cancer, oh, poor me,'" she said. "Figure out what you can do, because no matter what, you can always do something."

Chemotherapy rehab, an exercise course for cancer patients at Providence Alaska Medical Center, helped her maintain her fitness and stamina. Twice a week Landis did 45 minutes of strength and cardio training, followed by 30 minutes of visualization and guided relaxation. Because of the rehab, Landis

walked a half marathon only four weeks after completing radiation.

She also listened to her body. When she was tired, she napped. When her body craved a certain food, she ate it. She took supplements and received regular massages to help relax.

She continues to do what she can to help prevent a recurrence. She eats more vegetarian meals and exercises more. She focuses more on the things she enjoys, including family, friends, crafts and cooking.

"Having a positive attitude makes it less difficult," she said.

DON'T LET IT DEFINE YOU

Five years out from her initial diagnosis, Landis doesn't consider herself a cancer survivor any more than she would consider herself a survivor of any other disease.

"I am unwilling to let a disease define me," she said. "Instead, I choose to be defined as a good mother, wife, friend, pet lover, cook and crafter."

And the one who received a potentially life-shattering diagnosis – and laughed in its face. 



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