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## Barbara's Ovarian Cancer Story Part 3

Update - Thanksgiving 2006

*by Barbara Ehlers-Mason, RN*

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Happy Thanksgiving 2006

Barbara's continued Ovarian Cancer Story:

It's been two years since my last article and I have a lot to share with you. Presently, I'm sitting in my cozy little office/guest room, in my cozy house on Whidbey Island, Washington. Rosie-the-cat is reclining on the windowsill and we're both staring out at the wind-whipped trees and billowing, dark clouds being blown across the sky. It's very beautiful and I'm very grateful to be here!

At my last writing, I had just completed eight cycles of heavy-duty chemotherapy for advanced ovarian cancer and was in remission, ready to celebrate a very special Thanksgiving with my family. (See articles 1 and 2 on the "articles" page at [www.dstress.com](http://www.dstress.com).) Those holidays were wonderful. I felt healthy, had hair, was working and exercising and planning my retirement date, (September 2005), and subsequent move to our home in Washington. Being an inveterate planner/list-maker and worrier, I organized the retirement and move to within an inch of its life. I knew when my last day of work would be; how much vacation time I had on the books and what day we'd be packing up. John made his plans to close his office and relocate his business. We were done with cancer and ready to move on! Well, as we all know, life has a way of not always going according to plan. We were about to be thrown a real curve-ball.

In March, we took a great trip to Arizona to celebrate my birthday. On the drive from Phoenix to Bisbee to visit friends, we marveled at the lush green desert, abloom with flowers after recent rains. Locals told us that this beauty lasted about two weeks before fading to gold and brown, and people had learned not to take it for granted. Well, that's true about anything, isn't it?

The day after we returned from our vacation, a message on the answering machine said a new suspicious mass had been found on my most recent CT scan, the one I had done before we left for Arizona. I was devastated and furious and terrified! I ranted and I raved and I screamed, scaring John and the cat. What about my plans? My retirement? Moving to my new home? What about my life? I don't want more surgery, more chemo! I don't want to lose my hair again! I feel fine and healthy- how can this be happening AGAIN? I had taken for granted that the first surgery and chemo had worked and I was cured. But in fact, 70-90% of people have recurrence at some point in time. I just didn't think I would be one of them. I had to completely let go of my carefully orchestrated master-plan and face this challenge head on.



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June found me back at UCSF for major surgery for removal of a tumor that was very close, but not on, the liver. Because ovarian cancer cells tend to migrate to the spleen and gallbladder, they also removed those organs. I was lucky to have access to one of the best surgeons in the country and post-op reports stated that they had completely removed all the cancer! I used all the same tools to prepare pre op and postoperatively as I had for my first surgery and my recovery was good. I was home in five days and back to work in five weeks. I started chemo in July.

On December 1, 2005, I had my last chemo cycle. Other than a very low blood count (I was very anemic and my white count was very low), I tolerated the treatments fairly well. Acupuncture, visualization, exercise and supplements all played an important part in my work to stay as strong and healthy as possible. My hair thinned considerably, but I didn't have to wear wigs or cover-ups. With the particular drug regimen I was on, there is a 60% chance of hair loss. Before treatments started, I researched the web for any products that might minimize this side effect. I found a product called E.V.P.3 Chemaïd. The website is: [www.evp3.com](http://www.evp3.com). It provides good information and research so I decided to give it a try. I don't know if it was the chemaïd, the different type of drugs regimen and dosage, supplements or all of the above, but I kept the majority of my hair. Seems like such a minor thing when you are fighting for your life. Yet sometimes those small things make a difference in quality of life. I felt that I looked healthier and "normal" and that translated into not feeling like a cancer patient.

The new year brought new resolution to finally make our plans to retire and move. My labs were good, my scans were clear and we moved to Whidbey Island in May. We've been involved in projects ever since.

First on the agenda was painting the inside and the outside of the house. Just as John and I have been a good team in my healing process, we've made a good team in working on our home. And it's been fun! We dug a garden using picks and shovels. We built planter boxes and created a Zen rock garden; we yanked out a huge juniper bush and planted roses and dahlias. At the end of the day we collapsed into recliners with such a good feeling of accomplishment. I've never used my muscles like that before. I'd be exhausted by 8pm-it was such a good kind of tired. One of my favorite activities was sitting in the dirt, pulling weeds. The sun on my shoulders, eagles soaring overhead, the smell of earth and flowers and growing things became a huge part of my healing process. I visualized my immune system plucking out and "disappearing" any unhealthy cells from my body with each weed I pulled. Working in the garden has become a wonderful meditation for me. I clear my mind and totally focus on the task at hand. Learning how to live in the moment is an ongoing lesson, and I have to continually find a balance between artful planning and my natural tendency to organize the future. I've learned a greater appreciation of each sunrise and sunset. I notice the rhythm of my breathing and muscle movement when I walk and hike. I take time to pick up interesting bits of wood from the beach and decorate my garden with them. I revel in the love of my family and dear friends. I consciously practice NOT taking anything for granted and I try to live each moment joyfully. I have a favorite mantra that I recite to



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myself on my daily walks. “thank you for all the blessings I enjoy; thank you for my health today; thank you for my family and friends; thank you for allowing me to spend time in this beautiful place; thank you for the gift of life! And wouldn’t it be very, very nice if abundance cascades into my life and into those I love-abundance of health-physical, emotional and spiritual; and financial abundance.

I wish I could say that with all the meditation and mantras, I now lead a joyful, positive life. The truth is that I have my ups and downs; my incredibly joyful moments along with times of fear, sadness and anger. I go into worry-mode when it’s time for lab work and waiting for results. I get fearful about any new ache or pain (does this mean the cancer is back?) I vacillate between should I go ahead and spend money on redoing the kitchen now or keep that money in savings a little longer. Sometimes I feel caught between living in the moment and wanting to plan future projects for next year, two years from now, five years from now. And I still get angry that this happened to me, even though I’ve learned many lessons in the past few years. One of the main lessons I’m starting to grasp is that life is an act of faith. When I was planting the garden, I mostly put in vegetables and flowers that would reward me with bouquets and crops right away. My act of faith in the future was planting a cherry tree. My daily prayer is that I’ll be around to enjoy the blossoms and pluck the cherries.

This year we will celebrate Thanksgiving in our new home. We’ll share our gratitude with friends and family; we’ll feast and watch football; and we’ll toast to health, happiness and prosperity. The garden hibernates now beneath a blanket of red and gold leaves. The tulips, daffodils and hyacinths I planted last week rest and wait until it’s their time to burst forth into colorful splendor. And I rest, write, clean closets and enjoy indoor projects as I wait for spring, when I’ll burst out to nurture and be nurtured in my garden.

Here’s to rainy days and warm fires NOW and digging in the dirt in the FUTURE.

Happy Thanksgiving

Barbara Ehlers-Mason Whidbey Island, WA