

Caught by Surprise

A two-hour trek in the car is hardly fun, but for Melissa it meant the Blue Ridge Mountains and a pleasant long weekend getaway with her family. A family friend owned the mountain house, and was kind enough to rent it to the Gutierrez family and their relatives (Gutierrez Interview). Talk of future trips and exciting events floated through the vehicle, and Melissa couldn't help but be eager about the coming weekend. The trip was long due for Melissa and her sister, Olivia, since a teacher from their elementary school was battling brain cancer. Melissa and her class knew that cancer was bad, but the school had explained it to them "in very small terms," which did little to answer their numerous questions and quell their fears (Gutierrez Interview). A break from a world of unknowns would remedy the terror Melissa was feeling. What was shaping up to be a relaxing and possibly therapeutic vacation would soon morph into a flashbulb memory for Melissa.

Apple-picking filled the first day in the mountains, and left everyone spent (Gutierrez Interview). Melissa and Olivia retired to their room and prepared for bed. When their parents walked in, the girls had no reason to believe anything was out of the ordinary. They told them that Mrs. Myers, Melissa's teacher, had sent out an announcement to the community about her successful recovery, and the girls were relieved. It is common for children to notice when something is wrong, even when they are not directly told about the situation ("Coping with Cancer"); however, Melissa believed that her parents' rambling about survival rates and treatment options were to make up for not knowing "much about cancer at the time" (Gutierrez Interview). Then they dropped a bombshell on their daughters: their mom had stage three breast



cancer.

Melissa's mom, Cristina, had been diagnosed with a Ductal Carcinoma in Situ (DCIS) after finding a lump on her left breast during a self-examination about a month prior (Gutierrez "Journal"). Around one in five women diagnosed with a new breast cancer will have DCIS ("Understanding a Breast Cancer Diagnosis"). Cristina had the option of a lumpectomy, removal of the breast lump and some healthy tissue, or a mastectomy, removal of the entire breast ("Breast Cancer Glossary"). She decided on a bilateral mastectomy and a sentinel node biopsy, which resulted in the removal of two cancerous lymph nodes (Gutierrez "Journal"). By this point, Melissa's mother had undergone major surgery, PET scans to check her ovaries, CAT scans to follow up on the PET scans, biopsies, and bone scans to check for any signs of bone cancer (Gutierrez "Journal"). She was also doing her best to explain to her children what was happening since younger children have many questions and need to be assured that they are also cared for ("Coping with Cancer"). Despite this already lengthy list, this was just the beginning of the Gutierrezes' long journey. A port would be installed so Cristina could receive her chemotherapy (Gutierrez "Journal"). There would be three months of chemo for the first round, followed by another phase of a different drug and Herceptin (Gutierrez "Journal"). Herceptin is an antibody which was relatively new in 2007 (Gutierrez "Journal"). It reduces the chance of recurrence by fifty percent, and is specifically for women diagnosed with cancer (Gutierrez "Journal"). Its effects are lesser than that of chemo, so during this phase her hair would begin to grow back (Gutierrez "Journal"). This and an appointment with a plastic surgeon meant things were going back to normal in some senses.

Cristina wasn't the only one dealing with a plethora of changes. Her children were constantly trying to figure out how this new development would affect not only their mother's



life, but theirs and their relationship with her. Younger children sometimes become clingier after a parent is diagnosed, but there is no right way to deal with the emotions (“Relationships and Family”). Melissa and her sister “tried to argue less and be more helpful around the house” since their mom’s energy levels were drastically lower than normal (Gutierrez Interview). Cristina’s strength had diminished to such a point that being “able to use the hair dryer” was a milestone instead of a daily task (Gutierrez “Journal”). They were kept in the ever-changing loop by their family, and their parents made sure that questions were always welcome. Breast cancer is especially difficult on daughters because they become fearful of being more at risk for breast cancer (“Relationships and Family”). Melissa finds that she is “still worried” about her chances of developing a form of breast cancer (Gutierrez Interview). She saw her mother go through immense pain, and found it terrifying despite the reassurances of family and doctors.

Melissa’s mother made a full recovery after surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. It is not unusual that familial relationships change during the time between diagnosis and recovery (“Relationships and Family”). For the Gutierrezes, this meant becoming closer and trying to find positives in everything. Family is a good source for both practical and emotional support (“Relationships and Family”). The time of the vast unknown was finally coming to a close for Melissa and her family, and they were forever changed because of it. Melissa herself emerged from the experience with newfound positivity.



Works Cited

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