

Alone No Longer

When cancer struck my wife the second time, it had a profound effect on my priorities in life, in both expected and unexpected ways.

by MICHAEL LEE STALLARD

Many inspiring articles have been written about cancer survivors and how the experience of facing cancer and overcoming it changed their lives. Fewer are the stories of those who walk beside them. Just as a stone tossed into still waters sends ripples to every shore, the impact of a cancer diagnosis stirs up the lives of more than just the patient. This is my story of walking beside my wife Katie during her battle against first one cancer and then a second a year later, a journey that has changed my life in expected and unexpected ways.

“Your wife has cancer and it has spread some... I’m sorry.” On January 7, 2004, I heard

those most sobering words from my wife’s surgeon as I stood in the waiting room of a hospital in Greenwich, Connecticut. Thirteen months earlier Katie had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Fortunately, it was caught early and treated through surgery and radiation. As frightening as breast cancer was, this diagnosis of advanced ovarian cancer left me stunned.

That evening, I took our daughters, Sarah (age 12 at the time) and Elizabeth (age 10), and my mother-in-law, Bunny Harrison, to see Katie in the Intensive Care Unit. She looked so pale and fragile that it scared the girls. On our way out of the ICU Sarah backed up against a wall and started to slide down as she fainted. A short time later, as we passed through the hospital lobby on our way to the parking lot, Elizabeth began to sob. I knelt down to her level and Sarah and I both wrapped our arms around her.

That night our hearts were broken. We all knew Katie was not well and her future seemed uncertain. I vividly remember the overwhelming feeling I had struggling to figure out what I should do to help Katie and our two beautiful young girls who had fallen asleep on their mother’s pillow beside me. At first, I began to pray for wisdom and strength. As I grew tired, my words were replaced with unspoken yearnings as I called out to God for help.

After dropping the girls off at their schools the next morning, I returned to the hospital. Bunny had spent the night in Katie’s room so that she would not be alone when she awoke and the mental foggiess of the anesthesia had cleared. To my surprise, my friend Jason Pankau, a former All-American middle linebacker and captain of the Brown University football team, was sitting at Katie’s bedside too. I was shocked that he beat me to the hospital. At the same time, it comforted and encouraged me that Jason had rushed to our aid.

From that day forward, over the course of the next year, we experienced an extraordinary outpouring of affection and support from a community of family and friends. There were

tangible gifts — beautiful bouquets of flowers, care packages of reading materials, lotions and snuggly blankets, an assortment of Ben and Jerry’s ice creams, and notes of encouragement – and the intangible yet very real gifts of love and prayer.

The things our family and friends did could fill the pages of a book. One dear friend prepared a beautiful travel bag for Katie to take with her to the chemotherapy sessions. Inside the bag were gifts for passing the time such as a CD player and CDs and a book, as well as practical items such as band-aids and lotion. Another dear friend came to visit Katie in the hospital and offered to organize dinners to be brought in. And organize she did! A network of moms from our elementary school brought us dinners over a span of months. This friend made sure there were a variety of meals (okay ladies, hold it on the lasagna this month) and even brought over extra food one week when stormy winter weather was forecasted. The food was so good I gained ten pounds! Friends chauffeured our girls to and from their after-school activities. We regularly had people stop by to see us. The visits weren’t somber occasions though, quite the contrary. We talked and laughed and enjoyed one another’s company.

Teachers and administrators kept close watch of our girls and reached out to say they were there for them if they wanted to talk. The principal of our elementary school surprised Katie when she visited her in the hospital and slowly walked around the hospital floor with her, IV pole in tow.

We are fortunate to have several talented professional musicians as friends. Tony Cruz, a musician for the Broadway show “Hairspray,” took us backstage to meet some of the cast members and presented our daughters with programs autographed by the cast. Alexander Constantine, the artistic director of the Grace Notes, a women’s a cappella group that Katie sings in, wrote and arranged a song for the group that he dedicated to Katie. Rob Mathes, a

composer/arranger, dropped off CDs and DVDs and, along with his wife and daughters, frequently stopped by on Sunday afternoons to visit us. I'll never forget when he told me that “music is an antioxidant” and he thought some of his favorite CDs would help Katie.

The particular type of chemo Katie had in the spring kills all fast-growing cells, cancer or not. While we were on a much-needed family vacation after her very first chemo treatment, Katie began to lose her hair. Knowing that the chemo would have that effect, she had already ordered a wig. Upon our return, a close friend accompanied her to the salon, held her hand and shared in her tears as the stylist shaved off Katie's remaining hair then shaped and styled the wig.

With each chemo treatment that spring, it took Katie a little longer to recover. On their own, Sarah and Elizabeth went through our family photos and pulled out memory-laden pictures, each selected because they knew it would touch their mother's heart. The pictures were assembled in a collage that the girls placed a few feet from Katie's side of the bed so that she could look at them while bedridden. Later, Katie tearfully told me just how much those pictures meant to her and how often she studied them.

When you experience difficult times, I suspect it's normal to have people share that they are praying for you. In our case, we seemed to have all the bases covered. There were people praying from coast to coast and, we learned, as far away as Rwanda and Poland. But that's not all. Christian, Jewish and Muslim friends were praying for us. One atheist friend said he was sending positive thoughts our way! These heartfelt expressions of concern and compassion were deeply moving to us.

A few times we took people up on their offer to “call me if you need anything.” One evening, I remember having to rush Katie to the emergency room. While there, a call came in from home that Elizabeth needed Valentines for school the next morning. I called a friend of

ours, Carolyn Dewing-Hommes, and she promptly picked up Elizabeth and took her to buy the cards.

As I immersed myself in reading medical journal articles and watching web casts of presentations by cancer specialists to learn more about treatment options, I discovered several internet message boards for cancer patients and posted requests for people to contact me if they had experience with the treatments we were considering. About ten women from around the country sent me emails. One woman, Helen Palmquist from Lincolnshire, Illinois, was especially helpful. A cancer survivor herself, she frequently scans the online ovarian cancer message boards for people she can reach out to and encourage. Helen was diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer 20 years ago when her two sons were 13 and nine years old and, although she has had one recurrence, she has been in remission for more than 13 years now. Her encouragement and counsel helped me a great deal.

After the first round of six chemo treatments Katie’s test results looked good. Still, we opted to have her undergo follow-up surgery to see if there were any visible signs of cancer “flying under the radar” and to put in a port that would be used for additional chemo treatments. When it came time to schedule the surgery, this time in New York City, a friend called the anesthesiologist who was her attending physician through residency and asked her to cover Katie’s surgery. Katie and the doctor were able to chat a little before the procedure began and we were grateful to have that personal connection.

The healthcare workers we met locally at Greenwich Hospital and subsequently at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City were so caring and encouraging to us. Katie and I enjoyed the friendliness of the doormen at Sloan-Kettering. They seemed to spot cancer patients walking down the street, and would immediately make eye contact, flash big

smiles and say enthusiastic hellos. (We figured that they had become skilled wig spotters.) Warm and welcoming attitudes were also to be found in the receptionist and security people in the lobby, the administrators, and the doctors and nurses we met. Rather than being a glum atmosphere, the place was abuzz with positive energy and people who seemed to love what they did, the people they treated and those whom they worked alongside. Who would ever guess that a cancer center would be like that?

In the fall of 2004 Katie underwent a second round of chemotherapy, this time comprised of three high-dosage chemotherapy treatments delivered directly into her abdomen via the port. Usually active and outgoing, this regimen was much tougher on her system and it would take up to a week after each chemo treatment before she was on her feet again.

Back in the spring during one visit, Rob Mathes told Katie that he would give her a solo in his annual Christmas concert in the New York City area. Rob, who records with or arranges for the likes of Eric Clapton, Bono, Tony Bennett, and Yo-Yo Ma, is an amazing musician. He pulls together some of the top New York City-based studio musicians and back up singers for this concert. And Rob was offering to arrange a song for my wife? Rob’s offer would be an incentive for Katie to endure the difficult treatments she would undergo that fall. I will never forget the moment Katie showed me the printed score of the song he arranged entitled “Bethlehem.” When my eyes moved beneath the title and I spotted the words “for Katie Stallard,” I was rendered speechless.

In December 2004, before an audience of 1,200 people that included many of the friends who helped us, Katie, who was now officially in remission, sang “Bethlehem” accompanied by Rob on piano and the large choir that she normally sings with for this annual concert. It was a moment that Katie and I will forever cherish, an event that marked the end of a difficult period in

our lives. Katie sounded remarkable and looked more beautiful than ever. As I sat in the audience, with our daughters at my side, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude that our prayers had been answered. Thanks to the loving people who came to our aid, we had made it through and our spirits were soaring.

Although there are many factors that affect the treatment of cancer, doctors recognize that the patient’s state of mind is extremely important. We’re certain that Katie’s positive attitude and strong Christian faith combined with our environment at home and in our community played a significant role in her recovery. I recall reading the worst thing that could happen to a cancer patient is to feel isolated and alone. Fortunately, we were far from alone. People did what they could to help us, whether it was preparing a meal, helping take care of our daughters, or arranging a song. At times, I felt like George Bailey in the final scene of the classic movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” when his friends rallied around him. With each act of kindness, the people around us lifted our spirits. As a result, we experienced something I wouldn’t have expected: joy and hope. The love we felt helped to crowd out my feelings of anxiety.

A Change in Me

Reflecting on our experience, I came to a realization that transformed my life: real joy — a genuine sense of gratitude and contentment — comes from being in an environment where people develop personal connections and a sense of community. After experiencing the joy of community, I can think of nothing in life that is more important or personally rewarding than caring for people. In fact, the only time I have felt the sheer joy I sensed when others helped us is when I have helped others. Now when a friend is facing a difficult period in life, I no longer sit back not knowing what to do. I call to say that I’m thinking about him and to find out how I can help. I also like to drop off a small gift to let him know that he remains in my thoughts and

prayers.

The unexpected change came in the profound effect this notion of community had on my thoughts about organizational environments and how they bring out the best and worst in people. Earlier in my business career I believed that it was wise to separate my personal life from my life at work. I was cordial and polite but kept an emotional distance from co-workers. Even though I was around people all the time I wasn't really connecting with them. In a sense, work became a stage for me. I didn't realize how relationally isolated I had become until I felt the joy that comes from being a part of a caring community. Now I know that being authentic is best for me and, I believe, for the people with whom I work. Instead of thinking of people at work as competitors, I am focused on achieving my personal potential given my unique abilities and on helping the people around me to achieve their personal potential given their talents. It's a different mindset—a way of thinking that is much healthier because it encourages connection rather than discourages it. This human connection among a group of people is what transforms a dog-eat-dog environment into a sled dog team that pulls together.

When you let achievement and competition totally crowd out time for relationships, as I had done at times in the past, you will eventually regret it. I was a human *doing*, not a human *being*. Like so many things in life, balance is key. Of course, there will always be seasons in our lives when we experience imbalance and those seasons may last for some time. If imbalance becomes the norm, however, a price will be paid someday.

After feeling the encouragement from the genuine friendships that developed over the course of Katie's treatment, I knew I couldn't go back to a workplace environment where people are so focused on work that they are largely indifferent to one another. Instead I set out with the help of Carolyn Dewing-Hommes and Jason Pankau, two of the friends who had stood with us in

our time of need, to write a book and take the message of how important relationships are in life to people and organizations nationwide. Our book, entitled *Fired Up or Burned Out*, was published in the summer of 2007.

In my research I learned that three out of four American workers are disengaged. That’s more than 101 million people whose hearts are not in their work. What a waste of potential. I’m not completely surprised though. One of the reasons is that people are so focused on tasks that they don’t take the time to get to know one another. Organizations today are so driven to achieve task excellence that they miss the importance of achieving relationship excellence. Without it, an organization will eventually fail. People will burn out. Decision-makers will make poor decisions as a result of the breakdown of communications. Workplaces that don’t achieve relationship excellence are not only toxic to our souls but also to our bodies. The need for relationships is deeply embedded in our DNA and when we live in relational isolation, our bodies pay the price. These negative work environments slowly, but surely, suck the life out of us.

I followed the clues where they led me in my quest to understand which work environments help people thrive, not just survive. I looked into psychology, sociology, neuroscience, organizational behavior, and social network analysis. I studied great leaders of nations, businesses, sports teams and social sector organizations throughout history. The more I researched, the more I saw how the degree of connection among a group of people determined whether they thrived or didn’t. Having felt the effects of connection on me while walking with Katie through her days of cancer I could better understand and *feel* why connection is so crucial. Connection makes a positive difference and is a source of competitive advantage to organizations. Research by the Gallup Organization, the Corporate Executive Board and Hewitt Associates bears this out. In organizations where a sense of community exists, people are more

engaged in their work and collectively perform better than organizations where people are less engaged.

Another lesson I’ve learned from standing alongside Katie during her fight against cancer is that, in general, connection comes more naturally to women. America desperately needs people who understand the importance of connection and can help organizations increase it. Knowing that, it saddens me to see women leaving the workplace in part because of the absence of connection. If we can fix the sorry state of connection in corporate America, it will be a win-win for individuals and for organizations.

As for Katie, I’m thrilled to say that she is in remission and feels great. She has moved on to new challenges such as parenting teenage daughters. And I am now a man on a mission to let everyone know what I’ve learned through this heart-wrenching then heart-warming experience. With connection we are happier, healthier, and more effective at whatever we do in life, including our time spent in the workplace. Life at work can be as rich as life outside of work when you connect with the people around you.

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Michael Lee Stallard is the co-founder and president of E Pluribus Partners. He is also the primary author of *Fired Up or Burned Out* published by Thomas Nelson. More about his book can be found at www.FiredUpOrBurnedOut.com.

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MICHAEL LEE STALLARD

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Michael Lee Stallard is president of E Pluribus Partners, a consulting firm based in Greenwich, Connecticut that focuses on employee and customer engagement. Formerly he was chief marketing officer for businesses at Morgan Stanley and Charles Schwab. Earlier in his career he was an investment banker and management investor in a private equity-backed acquisition of a mutual fund company. Michael is the primary author of the book *Fired Up or Burned Out* and a contributor to the book *What Managers Say, What Employees Hear*. He has spoken at conferences sponsored by *Fortune* magazine, The World Presidents Organization and the Corporate Executive Board, among others. Michael has been interviewed and quoted extensively in the media including in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. He received a bachelors degree in marketing from Illinois State University, a masters degree in business from the University of Texas of the Permian Basin and a law degree from DePaul University. He was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1991.

On a more personal note, Michael has been married to Katie Stallard for more than 21 years. They have two teenage daughters, Sarah and Elizabeth. The Stallard family resides in

Greenwich, Connecticut where they love spending time with their family and friends and being active in several community and faith-based organizations. Michael also enjoys reading biography, history, sociology, and psychology, and writing about the power of human connection.

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