

My Motivated Moment: Jennifer and Jay

This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Announcer] What was the moment in time when things changed for you? What motivated you to move forward or take action? Welcome to My Motivated Moment, a podcast featuring young women bravely facing a breast cancer diagnosis or risk of breast cancer, and the people in their lives who support them. In these live recordings, you'll hear all about the moment everything changed for them. And how their experiences inspired them to become empowered advocates for their own health.

Today, we're going to hear the story of a husband and wife, Jay and Jennifer. Shortly after they said 'I do', they learned she had breast cancer. It was a trying time for both of them, but she found the strength she needed to be her own best advocate and survive breast cancer.

We'll hear their inspiring stories and see how breast cancer affected both their lives, their relationship, and how they look at the future. First, let's hear from Jennifer.

[Jennifer] For as long as I can remember, I've always been a goal setter. I've always looked far into the future and planned everything out, what I wanted to accomplish in life and all the things that I wanted to do. In the summer of 2009, we were living in California. I had just finished my first year of practicing law, and I had been married for just three months. One night, while I was changing for bed, I felt a painful lump in my left breast and immediately panicked. I have extensive family history of breast cancer, and my mind just immediately sunk to the worst.

I called up my husband to come to our room, to feel it, to see if he could feel what I was feeling, and in typical Jay fashion, he was like, "No, you come downstairs." And I was like, "No, I need you to come here now." And he was like, "No, Jen, just come down here. Like what do you want?" And I didn't want to make a big scene because my younger sister was visiting. I didn't want her to panic. So, eventually he came upstairs, and I told him, "I felt something hard and painful and I wanted him to see if he felt it too." Sure enough, he did and he tried to convince me to just calm down. You know, it was a late Friday night. There was nothing we can do about it over the weekend, and we should just wait until Monday morning.

So as difficult as that was, we got through the weekend, and Monday morning I fiercely started calling all my doctors to see who could see me first. And my primary care physician was able to get me in. I went to their office, and she confirmed that she felt a suspicious lump as well, and they immediately sent me over to the Breast Center at our local hospital for a mammogram and an ultrasound. I remember so clearly standing there, getting the mammogram done. For those of you that haven't had the pleasure of a mammogram, you stand in this room with a machine, looking straight ahead, and it is just compressing your breast in all different directions for imaging purposes.

And as I was standing there awkwardly, the kind nurse looked at me and said, "Oh honey, has that been happening a lot?" And I was like, "Has what been happening a lot?" And she was like, "The blood?" And I looked down, panicked, and sure enough there was blood coming out of the

nipple of the breast being squished. And I thought, "Well, this is just not good" and the tears started. And she was like, "No, no, no, no, no, like it's okay. That happens." And I was like, "I don't think that happens." But she could tell I was panicking. So we finished up the mammogram and then we did the ultrasound and then they said the doctor wanted to redo all the images. So I thought, "Well, this is not [a] good sign."

And we repeated all of the imaging again and then they were like, "Get dressed. We want to talk to you in the other room." And at that point it was just like white noise. I had no idea what was going on. I just knew it wasn't good. And so I said like, "You need to go get my husband from the waiting room and have him come in so that somebody is focused on what you're about to say." So they told us that they were seeing something suspicious and they wanted to do a core needle biopsy to confirm what it was and that we were going to have to come back to do that.

So we did the biopsy, and in the meantime I just kept trucking along and I went to work. And we were scheduled to go back to the hospital on Friday for the results, and I left on my lunch break and I said to my secretary, "See you in a bit. I'll be right back." I thought I was coming back to work. And we went to the hospital and we were sitting and we're waiting and we're waiting. Eventually, they took my mom and I into the back room and we were still waiting for my husband to get there. And as we were waiting, unbeknownst to me, he was in the hall talking to the doctor. The doctor just swung the door open, kind of like looked up from the folder in his hand, and said, "So, it's cancer."

Again, just white noise. I couldn't process. I just...I know a lot of things were said and told to us, but I had no idea what was being said. Obviously, I didn't go back to work that day, and we spent the afternoon at the hospital getting more tests done. The whole process was just incredibly overwhelming, and it set off a whole series of doctors' appointments and additional tests, and we met with breast surgeons, and we met with plastic surgeons, and we met with oncologists, and we got recommendations from friends on who we should see. And we met with fertility specialists, and assembled a team, and in some way, shape, or form got ourselves together and decided we were going to be as aggressive as possible and do everything that we could because at the end of the day, I wanted to get back to the practice of law and I wanted to start my family and I just wanted my life to keep going.

I had a bilateral mastectomy, followed by six rounds of chemotherapy and reconstructive surgery, and was ready to move on with my life. I went back to work full-time. I kept practicing law and was hoping that we could watch the five years pass on by and start our family and just move on. After about four years, we moved here to the East Coast in the Maryland area, and Jay and I started talking about—it would soon be time to start a family (weeps). Sorry. At about the four-and-a-half-year mark, as we realized we needed to talk to specialists and sort of figure out what we needed to do and what precautions we should take given my history, I felt another lump on my chest.

It was a tiny little lump right near my collarbone and I was certain that it had not been there the day before. Again, I called Jay to feel it and he was calm as always, and said "I'm sure it's nothing. Like you just had your blood work done recently. Everything came back fine, but if it'll make you feel better, just call the doctor. Like go get it checked out." So I called the doctor.

They got me in immediately because when you are a cancer survivor and you say you have a new lump, they take that seriously. And so I went in and the doctor found this tiny little lump, and he was like "I really think it's nothing. There's no way. Your blood work came back normal. We should just watch it for a couple of months." And I just looked him dead in the eye and I was like, "Or what?" And he was like, "What do you mean 'or what'?" I'm like, "Watch it OR we do what?" He was like, "No, like that's my recommendation." I was like, "That's nice, but I'm not leaving your office until you send me for a full-body scan because I'm not going to sleep for a few months while I'm touching this thing every day wondering if it's growing."

So after a little bit more pushback, he finally agreed and sent me in for a full scan. And, as it would turn out, the lump that I felt was in fact a tumor and it had two little friends, also in my chest wall. And, despite the fact that I'd had a bilateral mastectomy and chemotherapy, we learned in that moment that there's still a one percent chance that this beast comes back and we had no idea. And I was floored. The white noise came back. I had no idea what was going on. The thought of having to put myself through that all over again was unbearable (weeps). To go through surgery and chemo and recovery the first time is hard, but you don't really know what you're facing. When you know what you have to face, to have to talk yourself into that again is almost impossible. And the thought of having to relinquish that control and the ability to do the things that I want to do in life was so difficult.

In that moment, I felt like I didn't trust my medical team. They didn't believe that that lump was probably cancer. They thought that everything was fine. I just doubted that they knew what was best for me, and I connected with the team at Sharsheret, which is an organization that provides support for Jewish breast cancer patients and their families, who had provided us with support during the first journey. And they directed me to a second opinion clinic up in Baltimore. And we had all of my records shipped up there, and the doctors met with us for hours reviewing everything, talking about my first course of treatment, what their recommendations would be the second time around, and we left there.

And I decided to take control of situation again and we came back and I fired everybody. I cleared out the entire staff and hired all new doctors, and basically said, "But my surgery is already set, so I'm going to need you to make this work on my schedule." So I had surgery again. I lost my implants. I had to go through about 50 rounds of radiation where I went every day Monday to Friday, went to radiation and then went to work, because that's what I do. I keep going. And then I had 16 rounds of chemotherapy.

And the operating theory was that the first round of chemotherapy just didn't do its job. So I had to have a tougher, longer course of treatment. And I'll never forget the first day that I had my first cocktail where the drug itself is literally so toxic, this drug that they're about to push into my body, that the nurse who brought it over was in basically a hazmat suit just to carry the bag of drugs to insert into my IV. And I went through 16 rounds of chemo and then at the end I was able to have reconstructive surgery again. Throughout all of it, I just kind of kept on moving forward. And when I was going through chemo, because I needed something new to focus on and some other goal to set in front of myself, I decided to sit for the Maryland bar exam. So I started studying and five weeks after I finished my treatment, I took the Maryland bar exam. And

today I'm practicing law in Maryland and I have a wonderful family and friends who supported me through all this (weeps).

And what I've had to learn is that that security blanket of the mastectomy and the chemotherapy and the treatments—it's gone. I don't have that ending confidence that it's never going to come back. And so, rather than planning what all my future goals are ahead, I've learned to treasure and value today and that I have the opportunity to be here and to have a job that I love and a family that supports me and to treasure each of those days. Thank you.

[Announcer] Jennifer survived and she found strength she never knew she had. And a major part of her inspiring fight was the support of her husband. Let's hear his perspective on Jennifer's incredible fight with cancer.

[Jay] The day had finally come, the day that I was going to propose to my future wife. We woke up on a Saturday morning, and we started the day out with a hike in the mountains of Orange County, California, the beautiful waterfalls where we ended up. After those few hours, went back home, got cleaned up, and Jen said, "What's next for the schedule today?" We always like going on little adventures. "So, we're just going to go out for dinner tonight in Newport Beach at the Harbor." Okay, so we got ready, went out to dinner. And as we got out of the car in the parking garage, out of the shadows emerged this tall figure, and in a very cheap Italian accent we heard somebody say, "Hello, I am Giuseppe. I'm your gondolier for the evening." And my wife said, "What ... what is this?" I said, "I don't know let's check it out."

So he ended up taking us to his gondola, and I said, "We're just going to go on a boat ride tonight before dinner." So about half an hour in, as we're in the canals of Newport Beach, the gondolier puts on a floodlight, puts on a siren, and says, "Folks, I'm really sorry. I have to stop your boat ride. I see something in the water and us gondoliers, we don't like to let things be in the water that look suspicious. So if you don't mind, give me a few minutes. I'm going to get this and fish this out of the water." Jen looks at me and says, "Is he really stopping our boat ride right now?" I said, "I don't know, let's see."

He fishes something out of the water and says, "Jen, would you mind holding this for me?" "He's giving me trash on our boat ride?" And interestingly enough, it was a bottle. And when we looked at the bottle, there was a message in the bottle. So I said, "Let's open it up." Jen opened the letter. She began to read it, and sure enough it was a letter from me. By the time she was done reading the letter, I was down on my knee with ring in hand. And I know what you might be thinking. This was not a skinny gondola from Venice. This was a sizable gondola, and she looked at me and said, "Thank you." Not yes, "thank you." But I knew what she meant. The rest of the boat ride was spent with her on the phone calling her mom, her sisters, and all of her friends sharing the wonderful news.

Fast forward. We had our wedding and been married for three months. And on a Friday night, Jen calls me upstairs. Something was upsetting her, I could tell in her voice. And she said, "Get over here. You need to feel my chest. I feel something." And right away I knew where her mind had gone to because both of our grandmothers and her aunt had all been survivors of breast cancer. And my wife always thinks the worst. So, in my fashion, my typical cool and calm and

collected attitude, I said to her "Yes, I feel something, but we don't know what it is. It's the weekend. There's no news until there's news. Let's try to relax. First thing Monday morning, we'll call the doctors and we will see what's going on."

Jen got an appointment, went to see her doctor, and even the doctor tried to reassure her, "You're so young. You're only 27. It's so unlikely that this is anything. Young women get lumps and bumps all the time, but let's get it tested." Sure enough, after testing the doctor said, "It's cancer." And instantly our lives were changed forever. Our plans, the path that we had set out for ourselves, the things that we wanted to do was forever redefined. And amazingly, my wife took the bull by the horns like she always does, and she set the tone for all of us—for myself, for her mom, for our families, our friends. And she made it quite clear to everybody, "I'm going to kick cancer's ass, and we're gonna to get the show on the road and do everything that we need to do."

Now during the process, one of the doctor appointments that we went on was to meet with a fertility specialist. Fertility specialist, who specializes in meeting with women who have breast or ovarian cancer, in order to think about and consider fertility preservation. We'd never thought about this. We never thought this is something that we had to consider. So he suggested, you know, the technology exists. We have the science. Let's save your eggs, make embryos, you should freeze them as a security blanket, as a safety-deposit. But her oncologist said, "You know, I'd rather not you'd be exposed to the extra estrogen since the cancer that you have is estrogen receptor-positive. And because of your age and because it's a Stage 1 cancer, I really believe that you'll hit the five-year mark and you should be able to carry on your own and get pregnant naturally."

So we put our faith in God and that's the path we went on. So we start counting down the years... one year, two years, three years, year four we move to DC. At about four and a half years, Jen says, "You know, we're only six months away." I said, "I know." And we really started to talk about what does this mean and how do we prepare and it's like, "Whoa, this is for real. Like life's about to get real for real." And almost immediately after, a couple days or a couple weeks later, she called me upstairs again to our bedroom and said, "I need you to feel my chest. I feel something." And there was something there. And again as usual I said, "Let's see the doctors. You just got your results back, your recent blood tests, everything's clear, everything's fine." And sure enough, it was back. Now before anything else, Jennifer said to me, "I don't care what we have to do, we're going to meet with a fertility doctor and we're going to figure out what our options are." So we did that and we ended up freezing embryos and having that for us.

Jen starts going through the treatment again, go through the motions, but something was different this time. Gone was her confidence, gone was her...her attitude that we're going to kick ass because, as she said, "If this came back now for the rest of my life, I'm going to wonder every day and every month and every year when's it coming back." And she was depressed and she was sad and it was really hard and really tough. And one night over dinner, she looked at me and said, "Thank you." I said "You're welcome. Wait a minute, thank you for what?" "Thank you for staying with me." "What do you mean staying with you?" "Well, I've learned that many women who go through this have either spouses or significant others who end up leaving. They say that, 'This isn't what I signed up for. I can't handle this. I can't deal with this.'"

And as I thought back to our wedding standing under the chuppah, or wedding canopy, at our ceremony thinking about how I felt about her and my commitment to her and that no matter what, for the rest of our lives, through thick and thin we were in everything together. And there was no other option. So I said, "You're welcome. Glad to be here."

Couple months ago, we found out and confirmed that we're going to have a daughter. And if there's one wish I can hope for it's that she'll have the same strength and tenacity as her mother. Thank you.

[Announcer] Together, Jennifer and Jay made it through one of the toughest experiences a couple can face. Jay followed Jennifer's lead, helping her get the care she needed and demanded. And today, as she continues to monitor her health, they are finally starting the family they always wanted.

We hope that stories like this help empower you to 'Bring Your Brave' and share your story. And don't forget to talk to your family to learn more about your own genetic risk for breast cancer. Join the conversation at cdc.gov/bringyourbrave or bringyourbrave.tumblr.com.

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