

Rose-Colored Glasses: My Breast Cancer Survivor Story



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Rose-colored glasses: A common English phrase or idiom that means to view something with optimism, even if the situation is negative. Some people use it as an insult to point out a person's naivety. I used it to get through breast cancer.



Preventative Care is Self-Care

I have never been someone who practiced preventative care. If I had a cold or was not feeling well, that was normally when I would seek out a doctor. I am also someone who never used to be mindful of living in the moment. When you lead a team at work and are raising three boys, you are always looking at your to-do list and working toward the next item on it. As with most women who put their focus on their career and family,

self-care often falls by the wayside and becomes a “nice to have” rather than a “need to have.”

In September of 2021, I reluctantly scheduled the mammogram doctors start recommending to women when they hit a certain age. As an avid gym goer, nutrition-conscious consumer and overall fit person, I had been brushing it off for years. In my mind, someone as in tune with their wellbeing as I am did not get cancer. I know my body; I would be aware if something was wrong.



A few hours after my very first mammogram, the doctor called me and stated they had seen something concerning on the scan. At that juncture, I did not consider cancer. Doctors find benign abnormalities all the time. They scheduled me for a 3D mammogram. Heading to that appointment, I still was not too concerned. Shortly after, I was informed that they found tissue abnormalities in my breasts. To confirm whether they were cancerous, I was scheduled for a biopsy.

After all testing was said and done, my doctor informed me that I had breast cancer in both breasts.

Like a Slow-Motion Movie Scene

Many people view big diagnoses like this as something that happens to other people, and it can shift your entire world when it becomes something happening to you. At this point, I did not know I would be a survivor or how serious the cancer was going to be. I felt like an actress in a slow-motion movie scene, experiencing this foreign moment in a vacuum.

My doctor told me that the cancer was caught in the early stages, which was a good sign. After I received an MRI, they confirmed that the cancer was in parts of my breasts that would make it difficult to stop the spread without a mastectomy. While I was grateful that I would not have to suffer through radiation and chemotherapy, the thought of a mastectomy scared me. It felt as though any semblance of the life I had before my diagnosis was fading.



Ultimately, I decided that feeling sorry for myself was not an option. I approached my breast cancer the way I approached training for a marathon. I did not let the overall task consume or frighten me; instead, I took one small step at a time to get to that end goal. My positive mindset created my own personalized pair of rose-colored glasses. I began to appreciate the small things in my life, like driving my boys to school or having a family dinner together. Breast cancer forced me to slow down my fast-paced life and take a moment to just *be*. Be a mom, a wife, a friend. A *person*.

An Uphill Battle

I knew that one of the best ways I could keep going about life after being diagnosed with breast cancer was continuing to work. I have been with Navistar for 17 years and have created a family out of my coworkers.

At one of my appointments after the official diagnosis, my doctor handed me paperwork that would approve me for short-term disability, but that did not cross my mind. Outside of work, my life had become filled with doctors' appointments, consultations, surgeries and people who beat the topic of cancer into the ground. Work was the place I could be me: Justina the hardworking, always present busybody. I didn't want to be "Justina with cancer." I just wanted to be me.



I continued to work through four surgeries and countless doctors' appointments. This routine of work and having something to focus on helped me remain positive. While not many people at work knew about my cancer at the time, my family provided the necessary support I needed to get through even the most difficult days.

Making a Community Impact

Now that I am in remission, my goal is to educate others about breast cancer and raise funds for research to find a cure. Topics such as breast cancer do not have to be taboo. I tell my story openly as an advocate for early breast cancer detection and the importance of taking care of yourself. One in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime. When you think of all the women you know, imagine the difference we could make if we openly discussed the topic.

Within the past year, Navistar has shown a strong commitment to employee wellbeing. On top of our insurance benefits, we are offered a subscription to the mindfulness app Calm and receive a monthly wellbeing newsletter. I have noticed a shift in Navistar's culture toward valuing work-life balance and prioritizing ourselves as people rather than just employees.



As the president of the employee resource group Women in Navistar (WIN), I found it especially important to make Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October something we put more effort toward. This October, WIN will be hosting an Awareness Festival to educate employees about breast cancer, fundraise and have fun and informative events like trivia. We are also hosting a Pink Out Day where employees are encouraged to wear pink to support breast cancer awareness, and a Survivor and Supporter Panel hosted by Navistar employees.

Our Breast Cancer Awareness Month activities will conclude with Chicago's Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, where Navistar will have a designated team and a pinked-out truck with donated snacks and drinks.

Standing Up and Moving Forward

According to BreastCancer.org, as of 2022, 3.8 million women in the U.S. have a history with breast cancer. Throughout this year, thousands more women will be given a breast cancer diagnosis. With the diagnosis affecting so many women, we cannot afford for breast cancer to be a taboo topic.

As with any illness, physical or mental, cancer is something you HAVE, not something you ARE. Cancer did not define me; it was a pothole in the road of life, albeit one that required a bit more downtime and repairs than most. I refused to run away; I wanted to run cancer down and run it over.



The further I go into remission, the less I find myself reaching for my rose-colored glasses. I have to remind myself to slow down and appreciate the blessings life has given me, from my family to my job to something as simple as a cheery, sunny day. I will continue to tell my story for the purpose of educating and helping others. Rose-colored glasses do not have to be negative. Choosing a positive mindset can make all the difference you need to move forward.