

BY ANGIE GRELLA

THE MOM WHO HAD NO HAIR

Mothering Through Breast Cancer



Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear, but Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair. Today these words from one of my son's favorite rhymes make me smile. But two years ago, they made me cry. I cried because, under my wig, I had no hair! No, it didn't bother my boys (ages 3 and 1 at the time). They accepted that Mommy's chemotherapy medicine made her hair fall out. But for me, it was more than not having hair.

At age 34, before I even had my first annual mammogram, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I will never forget sitting in the exam room on my seventh wedding anniversary and hearing those words, "It's malignant." From then on, everything seemed to move in slow motion: getting more tests, going to the Mayo Clinic for a second opinion, having a biopsy of the auxiliary lymph nodes (four were positive) and being recommended for a mastectomy. It was quite a shock, considering I had been nursing my 13-month-old son just one month before!

Even though my mother had died of breast cancer, I never in my wildest dreams expected to have cancer at age 34. She was 55 when she was diagnosed. Questions and fears bombarded me. Will I be able to see my boys graduate from high school? Will I even be there when they lose their first teeth? I remember looking at the expiration date on my driver's license one day and wondering if I would expire before my license. It was truly a time for trusting the Lord with all my heart. And he gave me the strength to get through it.

As a stay-at-home mom, I wondered how I would manage the fatigue, the nausea and the other side effects of the cancer treatment. I had six months of chemotherapy and six weeks of daily radiation treatment. Not only did I look terrible, I

often fell asleep putting my sons down for a nap! My body was falling apart, but inside, I was drawing closer to God and my family. The love of my husband and kids never faltered. And I knew God loved me, too. One night I was thinking about one of Nathan's (now age 5) stuffed bears. He had hugged it so much there was a bald spot on its back. It didn't do anything to deserve that bald spot; it just happened, but it was no less loved.

There were times when I questioned my value and worth as a mother. I felt guilty for not being the mother I should be. I couldn't carry my sons, or take them swimming or even

button their shirts (hard to do with no fingernails!). But thanks to my husband, the women from my church and the chaplain at the hospital, I realized this was a season when I needed to focus on taking care of myself so I could be there to take care of my kids.

Now I see what a blessing it was that my kids were so young when I was diagnosed. First of all, they probably won't remember the time Mommy just had fuzz on her head! Secondly, their smiles and energy and love kept me

going. My eldest son was potty trained during that time, but he still took naps in the afternoon, which helped me get the rest I needed.

Thankfully I made it through that season with two very active boys. My hair grew back (and my eyelashes, eyebrows and fingernails). My energy came back. And I hope and pray the cancer won't ever come back.

My advice about breast cancer? Know your risk. Know your body. Know God loves you. And know there is support to help you through it. **M**



Angie and her family today.

PHOTO COURTESY GRELLA FAMILY

Breast Cancer Awareness

By Carrie Carter, M.D.

— **Know Your Body:** Do monthly breast exams. If you're at high risk or age 40 or over, get a yearly mammogram and a physical exam by a doctor. Over 80 percent of breast cancer can be cured if it's detected early.

— **Know Your Breast Cancer Risk:**
Ages 20-30 ~ 1 in 2000;
Ages 30-40 ~ 1 in 200;
Ages 40-50 ~ 1 in 50.
There's a higher risk if you have a family history of cancer.

— **There Is Support:** If you're in treatment, let others bring meals, drive you, care for your kids and

care for you. Find support groups in your town and online.

— **God Loves You:** Tell him about your feelings, fears and needs.

— **For More Information** on breast cancer, go online at:
www.komen.org
www.breastcancer.org
www.cancer.org

Dr. Carter served as a pediatrician for more than 10 years in San Diego, California. She is a mother and national speaker on health issues and wrote *A Woman's Guide to a Healthy Lifestyle* (Spire/ Revell, 2006), available in the MOPShop at www.MOPShop.org.