

# Hope and Serenity- English Cancer Support Group



**H**ope and Serenity is an English Cancer Support Group which meets the last Wednesday of each month at the CLSC in Stanstead from 10 – 11:30 a.m. This group has been described as unique on two levels: it is the only English cancer support group outside of the Island of Montreal, and second— and possibly even more importantly— it is known for staying together, supporting one another and having good times together despite fighting a serious illness. It is a group for people with cancer or their care givers. The topics vary each month, and often the group goes completely off-topic, which seems to work. Things spoken about are confidential; no medical advice is given as we are not experts, that is up to the professionals, and no judgements are made. We would like to share some of our stories.

## My Cancer Story – Brenda Collier

In October of 2012, I received a phone call from my doctor informing me that my recent mammogram showed a small lump in my left breast. He sent me for a biopsy and a scan which showed it smaller in size than on the mammogram. However, it also showed the cancer had affected some lymph nodes in my left arm. I was then referred to a surgeon to remove the lump (lumpectomy) and it turned out that 13 lymph nodes were affected as well. The surgery took place three days before Christmas, so we had no celebrations that year.

In 2013, chemo treatment began. I had two wonderful friends who took turns accompanying me to the hospital. This was followed by 5 weeks of radiation, 5 days a week. (As everyone knows, parking is expensive, so it is easier if you have a few dollars in the bank.) While going for radiation, I was diagnosed with shingles. Luckily, it was caught early by the technicians and I was given medication.

After that, I had to see a nurse at the CLSC for what I called my “baby shot”. They are little needles to strengthen your immune system. This lasted for quite a while and I was happy when I didn’t need them. While visiting the nurse, she suggested I join an English cancer support group. I thought it was a terrifying idea: I was fearful it would be a big downer, that everyone would be crying, and I am such an upbeat person. I did not want it to change how I felt. I am basically a happy camper. I guess having a strong will I continued to golf during the chemo and radiation.

Attending the Group was the best decision I could have made. When you join, the rules are laid out not to discuss medical treatments too specifically because perhaps everyone has a different type of cancer. However, you can share your feelings about what you went through. I tried to make what I shared as comical as I could (that is my

personality). It made me happy to see some people laugh. I joined the group 5 years ago and am still going the last Wednesday of every month. I am sharing my story to encourage men and women in the Eastern Townships to join the group. It has helped me more than I can say, and perhaps it could help others.

## Cancer Journey – Barb

After noticing something might not be right and finding a large lump in the right breast, I consulted our local doctor. His concern was evident and he immediately set me up with an appointment to be screened. I could see the concern on the faces of the doctors even when they tried to downplay the seriousness. Beginning August 30, 2010, everyone and everything moved fast, with treatment starting October 1st of that year.

Chemo would be first as the cancer was advanced; there were two tumours over 5 cm each. They wanted to shrink the tumours before the operation. 8 treatments of chemo, 4 treatments of 2 different kinds of chemo. You must keep your fingers in ice during the treatment to stop the finger nails from falling off. The second treatment was much more difficult than I had imagined. Two days after treatment the severe pain from the waist down commenced and lasted about 6 days, then I was OK until the next treatment, which was every 21 days. By February, 2011 I was scheduled for a radical mastectomy, which also resulted in removal of all the lymph nodes in my right arm. The result of that was lymphedema in the right arm, compelling me to wear a compressive garment to control the build-up of fluid. That arm may not be used for blood tests or taking blood pressure. Scratches or cuts may result in cellulitis.

By June of 2011, five weeks of radiation started, which resulted in some serious burning, primarily due to lack of feeling from the operation and disruption of nerves. The good thing is, I did not feel it as much as I would have if the nerve endings were intact.

I joined the group in October of 2010 shortly after my diagnosis. It is a wonderful, supportive group. We share some very similar feelings and stories and yet each story is our own. Yes, we have lost people and there is sadness, but we celebrate life itself.

**(Note: One of the most difficult things to face was the loss of my hair. Not from vanity but from visibility. Suddenly people know you have cancer. It was not a secret, but I was not comfortable about people I did not know staring and thinking, “Oh, she has cancer.” It is strange what we focus on. I had told myself whatever happened just please let me get through it. It was my way of handling a difficult situation.)**