



Interview Transcript: Donna

Donna is a daughter, wife, mother and grandmother. She worked as a historic researcher for Aboriginal land claims in Manitoba.

Type of Cancer: Metastatic Breast Cancer

Age at Diagnosis: 50

Year of Diagnosis: 2007

Treatment: Radiation Therapy

Date of Interview: March 2010

My name is Blue Jay Woman and the Eagle is my spirit guide, but I'm also known as Donna Parisian Kabash. I am 53 years old. I have been living with metastatic breast cancer for four years; I'm lying, three years. I've been living with metastatic breast cancer for three years. I found out in April of 07 that I had cancer, found out by the end of May of 07 that it had already spread to both my lungs, and I have come this far, I have lived this long. I didn't think I was going to live very long. I actually thought that I would probably die by Christmas, the first Christmas. And I had no expectations and I was very, very scared about it. And I found that through our ceremony keepers, our lodge keepers, our medicine people, that we have to have faith and that you don't walk alone. And I have not walked alone and I don't walk alone now.

Ceremony

I have a lot of traditional beliefs in my own culture and I look at that as something that keeps me going. I pray an awful lot, I mean I've always prayed but it seems to me that I pray more with my spirit, and I do traditional ceremonies as well; I go to the healing sweats. When I first found out that I had cancer, that's what we did, we went and we asked one of the women that I know if she would be so kind as to do a sweat for me, and so we went and we did a sweat with her. My family all came with me, and it was beautiful; it was beautiful and I gained a lot of strength from that. The sweats were coming at the same time the chemo was starting and at the same time I got traditional medicines, and I think those in combination helped. I think that we are all born with spirit, and it needs to be nurtured, and I've been fortunate that I've had—been able to do that, and that I have strong people who will help me, and loving people, and there's been lots of songs and lots of ceremony and I take great heart in that.

Creating memories

I focus on teaching my children to do ceremony. I was really fortunate last year that I got to put them out on their first fast and that was incredibly awesome. I met a beautiful woman who agreed to do the sweat with us and so I went there and I came with all my little girls and my young women, and I don't think she was quite expecting so many of us, but there was five, five young women who sat out and then another friend of mine offered me her land and a teepee so that they have... they could all be together. For me it was incredible and I think that in years to

come, you never forget your first sweat or your first fast and they'll remember that. They'll remember that I was with them.

Finding a balance

When you have cancer, or when I found out that I had cancer, it affects not only the person who has it, it affects everybody around you. They carry it just as much. So at the beginning, because I wanted my family to know what I was going through, and I still do, but at a different level, I think, because at first, they would come with me because of their, oh so incredible love that they would come with me and they wanted to know that everything was being done. Like they wanted to hear it for themselves and so for—in order for that to happen, I would go first with my husband, I would do the exam, I would get the news and then my family would come in and the doctor would reshare that and then... and that worked OK for the first couple times. Where it stopped working was after the Herceptin round when I found out it didn't work and we were all devastated.

And I think first as a parent you want to—you want your children not to hurt. And at the same time, you're trying to process something that was very difficult to hear, and so they stayed for a while with me and I allowed that to happen, and then it got to the point of where I was... like, things would work and then they would not be working, and I think I almost fainted at one time because I was like, "Oh my God, I can't handle this." And all my family was with me in this very tiny room and I didn't have any room to breathe. I felt like I was suffocating and being smothered, and that was not their intent.

But I needed to find out how to find a balance, and then I thought about it for a long time and I thought, "OK, as much as I love you, as much as I love you, there is certain things that I need to do first for me, and one of them is to hear negative news and to be able to process it." I needed to be able to find a way to say, "OK, I can handle this, I can do this." And so I asked them not to come with me and I think that for myself it was a good decision, just because I haven't had really good news in a long time and I just need to be able to—not find a happy place, but find a place where I could deal with it. And so that's basically what happened.

Living well

To find out that you start this road of cancer almost at the end—I didn't believe that that could be. I didn't believe that that could be. I have moments of complete sadness. And I don't allow those moments to stay around too long, or try not to anyways. I have moments where I just break down and cry and then it just stops. And it could be anything, it could be a song, it could be a thought, it could be a picture, it could be walking someplace, it could be anything, and it just triggers a moment. And I think that when you have metastatic breast cancer, you're not going to be cured, that's not going to happen, but at the same time you could still live. And you could still live very well, so long as you don't let moments become hours and days or weeks. You know, just take that time and have that moment and then you move on, and you go back to "I can do this, I can do this."

Spirit

Probably one of the things that having metastatic cancer—is that you come to terms with the fact that you're going to die, that your physical body is going to die, and I think that when you have faith, you have that belief of spirit and I think... one of my friends best put it is that I am a

spirit that has a body, I am not a body with a spirit, so that when my physical body gives up, my spirit will move on. And a lot of what I do now is focused on making my family aware of that, that my spirit is still there and it's only a physical body.