



## Interview Transcript: Karen

As Vice President of the GlaxoSmithKline foundation, Karen manages community investments, philanthropic initiatives and stakeholder relations.

Type of Cancer: Breast Cancer (stage 2)

Age at Diagnosis: 46

Year of Diagnosis: 2004

Treatment: Lumpectomy, Chemotherapy and Radiation

Date of Interview: January 2010

My name is Karen Chow. I was 46 years old when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was Stage 2 but the aggression factor was third level so it was very aggressive. The surgery that I underwent was a lumpectomy and a sentinel node biopsy, but it was discovered the margins were not clear so I had to go in for a second incision and then I went through four rounds of AC chemotherapy, so Adriamycin cyclophosphamide. And then five weeks of radiation, which included a booster treatment to the tumour site.

### **The kaleidoscope**

A lot of people use the terminology “roller coaster,” so there is a roller coaster of emotion, emotions and physical pain and a whole lot of different things that you go through. Other times I think of it as a kaleidoscope because I almost felt a bit frantic during those first few days, and first few weeks afterwards, because you think, “OK, I do have cancer, so what does this mean?” And then the fear shows up and then you say, “OK, no, it’s OK: everything is going to be OK.” And then you wake up in the middle of the night and you say to yourself, “Is it going to be OK?” So you have this mixed reaction that is just so all over the place at that time, and I just kind of wanted to believe—and I did believe—that I would come out at the end of the journey, at the other end, just fine. There would be a lot of bad stuff to go through, right, to get there, but I started to build on that kind of confidence and strength, if you will, to just sort of set the course for the next little while.

### **Questions and answers**

There is an adjustment that needs to happen in terms of just being patient around even things like gathering information, because one of the things that is so bothersome when you’re first diagnosed is you want all the answers, right? Your fear is greatest about the unknown and so the more you can gather information and knowledge, I believe, helps you to harness a little control over the situation, because that’s—what you’re feeling is totally out of control when somebody says you have cancer.

Often when you hear those words, you don’t hear anything more after that until you’re able to say, “OK,” sort of plant your feet and say, “I’m now open to trying to understand what does this

really mean.” So I find that... what I found very frustrating in the beginning weeks is that I would ask the questions: “OK, so what is my diagnosis, what is my prognosis?”—many questions I would ask. You get answers but those answers would often open the door to five other questions, so I try to advise people that you don’t get all the answers right in one shot. But you need to continue to ask the questions.

### **Telling the news**

I think one of the really hard things for me... the hardest thing probably emotionally was having to tell family members that I had cancer. Even though I knew it would be fine, I spent a lot of time reassuring people that I would be fine. And part of the reason why it was a bit challenging was because I had lost my younger sister to lung cancer previously, and so the family had already lost one child, if you will; a member of the family. It was really hard to tell my parents that I had cancer, but it was also really hard to tell my sister’s girls that I had cancer. So that was probably one of the hardest things I had to go through, believe it or not.

### **Bad hair days**

You know intellectually that you’re going to lose your hair, but when it actually starts to fall out, it’s absolutely devastating. I guess women in our society, we define ourselves by certain things and part of it is, when you’re having a bad day, it’s a badhair day, right? So I was having a lot of badhair days through chemo. I think the worst part of it was standing in the shower and letting the water, the shower water, fall all over me but I couldn’t feel the water, I could just feel my hair falling over my body—one of the worst sensations through that whole period.

I did lose my hair. It is a very visual reminder that there is definitely something wrong going on with your body. But the other part of it is when... the days when I had a little more energy, I would say, “Well, OK, partway through this process now so pretty soon at some point, this hair is going to start to grow back.” And actually, I have Chinese hair, dead straight. So the first hair growth actually had a little bit of curl. It was pretty cool. Because ever since I was a little girl, I wanted curly hair. Unfortunately, first haircut—and it was a great haircut, it was just good to have your hair cut—all the curl was gone.

### **Setting goals**

I treated this whole period of my life as a bit of a project and said, “OK, where is it that I need to get to, when do I want to get there and what are the milestones along the way that I can actually celebrate and/or goals that I can establish to get me there.” So it was really important for me to set those goals and try to reach them.

I’ll tell you one story, and some people might not find it funny but we can laugh about it now. But after my first chemo, I felt good, I actually felt great, so I went out for a power walk, and we’re talking about... this is in January, right? It’s cold, it’s winter, I’m out there power walking, feeling great, so for the three weeks in between my chemos, I went power walking almost every day, feeling great. Get there, they do blood work before you go into chemo and you have a consult before you go into the lab. So before the consult, the oncology nurse said, she said, “What have you been doing? Your white cell count is way below the threshold; like, it’s in the basement. We don’t think we can give you chemo today.” Well, I almost lost it because she’s messing with my goal. I had to have chemo that day. I had set myself up, I knew emotionally, mentally, intellectually, I was set, I was ready for it, and if I didn’t get chemo that day, that was really going to mess... and mess up my plan because then, that meant I wasn’t going to finish

my treatment until three weeks later, after I had set my goal. So I... anyway, I negotiated so I got my chemo that day.

But the whole thing about setting goals, that's what I would say was very important for me. And unbelievable support from family and friends, people—almost sometimes perfect strangers, right?—and acquaintances, people not necessarily really close friends. So I think that having... being surrounded by people a lot through that was incredible. My husband was incredible. He's just an amazing support, so that was for me very, very important, how to get through this whole journey.

### **Fear**

For me, initially I was obsessive about doing my selfexams daily. When I told my oncologist, he said, "You don't have to do it daily. It's fine if you just do it once a month." So it's been almost five years now and I'm just now progressing to once a month selfexams, but it's funny how, yes, the fear is always there but it does sort of dissipate over time. But then it—you go into a new day and you happen to maybe lift your luggage the wrong way and you're feeling a pain in the chest wall and you think, "What is that?" But in fact, you just strained the muscle and it's not anything more serious, but that fear doesn't ever really go away.

### **My journey**

It is a journey and with any journey there is a beginning and there is an end and there's lots of stuff in between. But it does get better. There are some dark days during chemotherapy but if you keep in perspective what your goal line is to reach the end of the treatment journey, you will get there. And they talk about the light at the end of the tunnel, it does get pretty bright at the end, so it's—people have to have faith that they will get through it and it will be OK.