

The Chronicles of Hope are the *real life* stories of those helped by Komen for the Cure's commitment to the care, research and understanding of breast cancer. These are their—and our—stories.

Karen Durham is a 23 year breast cancer survivor. In 1989 she was diagnosed with Stage II, ER+ breast cancer. Karen remembers that at the time, "They didn't know much more than that about it. They didn't have the complete breakdown of tumors back then." Karen worked for the Federal Aviation Administration. She took a five month leave of absence to receive treatment which included a radical mastectomy, lymph node removal and 9 months of chemotherapy.

In January of 1991, immediately after finishing chemotherapy, a scan revealed that she had hyperdysplasia in her right breast. The doctor recommended surgery for the pre-cancerous condition and she underwent a second mastectomy.

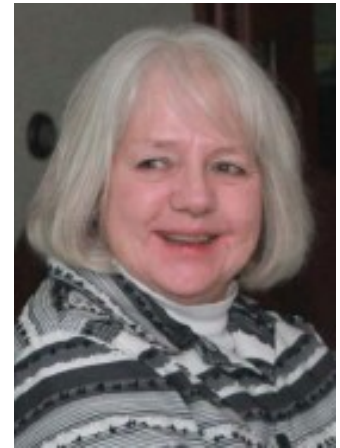
At such a young age, Karen didn't know anyone who had been diagnosed with any kind of cancer. She recalls, "It was just before Christmas and I thought that I was going to die, I really did. My surgeon told me that I needed to get my affairs in order and I didn't want to know what that meant." By March, Karen was attending a support group where she met and bonded with a woman who had been diagnosed one year before Karen, almost to the day. Karen learned that people could survive a cancer diagnosis.

Karen took another short leave of absence, but worked through the majority of her treatment, including reconstruction. She reports that it was difficult to return to work because everyone knew what she had been through. She suddenly felt weak in the male-centric workforce where she had worked as an electronic technician. Due to her radical mastectomy, most of the muscle had been removed from her chest and she physically could not do the lifting she had done before. Because so many lymph nodes were removed, Karen suffers from chronic, severe lymphedema. She has recurring infections in her left arm, wears a compression sleeve, and undergoes frequent manual lymph drainage.

"I felt like I had a stigma. As if people were saying, 'Don't get close to Karen, you are going to catch this from her.'"

Karen joined a work training program and soon became the Communications Manager for the Dallas/Fort Worth airport. Still, she felt as though her co-workers viewed her differently.

Thankfully, Karen had a good support system and her husband became her rock. Karen reports that during those early years "Tom did much better than I did!" Today, Tom continues to be Karen's greatest supporter. After 19 years in remission, in February of 2009, Karen was diagnosed with Stage IV metastatic breast cancer. Karen is now back in treatment and Tom has accompanied her on all but one medical appointment. Her conclusion: "I think I'll keep him!"



Survivor
Karen Durham

Diagnosis
ER+/Metastatic

Years of Survivorship
23

"It is hard when there is no end point. When you finish your treatment at our cancer center, you ring a bell. A metastatic person never gets to do that because they never finish their treatment."

For Karen, the diagnosis of metastatic disease was “just as devastating, or even more so than the first time.” The hardest thing has been the realization that surgery is not an option and that she will be in some kind of treatment for the rest of her life. Karen has a very unusual kind of metastasis that has resulted in an invasive tumor in a muscle under her left collarbone. She says “It took me a year to accept that they were not going to remove the tumor.”

“If you’re not completely 100% comfortable with your doctor, you need to get a second opinion. Today, there are too many oncologists out there for you to have to settle for one you don’t trust 100%.”

Doctors suggested that Karen join a clinical trial because there is no known treatment for breast cancer tumors that have invaded the muscle. To date, Karen has experienced minimal side effects from a drug combination that has proven effective in patients with leukemia. The treatment has kept her cancer from growing for just over 3 years. If the cancer does progress, Karen knows she will have to try a new treatment.

INVOLVEMENT WITH KOMEN

After completing treatment in 1991, Karen became deeply involved with Komen and served in several volunteer positions at the Dallas Affiliate. In 1995 she moved to Tucson and became a founding Board Member of the Southern Arizona Komen Affiliate. When she returned to Texas in 2000, Karen became a volunteer for the Tyler Affiliate where she has held a myriad of roles and currently serves as the Affiliate Education Chair. Karen represented the Tyler Affiliate at National Lobby Day in Washington, D.C. in 2008, and has been active in Komen public policy in Texas since 2007.

For her many years of dedicated service, Karen has been acknowledged by the organization through the Komen Cameo Award (2005) and Promise of One Award (2009). In addition, the Tyler Affiliate awarded her with the Joyce Greenberg Volunteer of the Year Award (2011).

Karen has been a member of the Komen Advocates in Science (AIS) community since 2007. After completing a training program, Karen began peer review of research proposals submitting for funding consideration. She is also engaged in two AIS working groups and recently participated in the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Metastatic Breast Cancer Roundtable.

Research advocates-comprised primarily of breast cancer survivors and co-survivors-have been integrated into all the facets of Komen, including the research program where advocates are asked to sit as colleagues at the table with researchers in reviewing grants and directing our research program. Research advocates bring a sense of reality and urgency to the table, and assure perspectives from the world of patients/survivors are a cornerstone and fully integrated into decisions at every step of the research process.

KOMEN'S COMMITMENT

Komen is committed to supporting those, like Karen, who are living with metastatic breast cancer. In addition to investing more than **\$80 million** in metastasis research since 2006, Komen also provides [educational materials](#), [conference support](#) and Affiliate funded grants across the nation. In 2012 Komen held its first Roundtable to address the needs of those living with MBC.



Karen Durham with other AIS Members Participating in Komen Funded Training at Genomic Health during the American Society of Clinical Oncology Breast Health Symposium September, 2012

Read about other survivors in our [Chronicles of Hope Series](#) on the Research and Scientific Programs page of Komen.org.