



## Chronicles of Hope: Bonnie Olson

*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.

January 18, 2003 is a date that Bonnie Olson will never forget. After monitoring a lump she felt under her arm for approximately three months, she finally went to her physician's office. When the doctor wasn't available, she met with the physician's assistant who detected something amiss in her lymph nodes and ordered a chest x-ray and mammogram "just in case." After the radiologist reviewed the films the following Friday afternoon, the technician was called back in to do a late afternoon ultrasound. The weekend seemed unbearably long as Bonnie waited to find out that there was a lump in her breast that had to be removed. When she told her husband, they were both panic stricken because his sister passed away from breast cancer.

Bonnie says the surgeon was her "lifeline" because, "the first words out of her mouth were, 'This doesn't have to be a death sentence.' And it was like I could breathe again." Bonnie was diagnosed with HER2 positive breast cancer, a cancer in which cells have too many HER2 receptors. In turn, the HER2 protein supports the growth of cancerous cells.

Initially, Bonnie had a lumpectomy, but when her surgeon determined that some cancer cells remained, she opted for a double mastectomy and chemotherapy. She waited to have reconstructive surgery until much later because she says her mindset at the time was "I'm more than just boobs. I don't need them."

As Bonnie was receiving treatment, her oncologist offered her the opportunity to be part of a clinical trial for trastuzumab (Herceptin®). Herceptin is a therapy that kills cancer cells by targeting the HER2 protein. It was already in use for metastatic disease, and Bonnie remembers weighing the decision to participate. Ultimately, she decided that because it was a drug that had been used before, she was willing to participate in the year and a half long study. Bonnie's arm of the trial received adriamycin, with six months of paclitaxel (Taxol®) followed by one year of Herceptin.

When asked how her trial experience was different from the standard treatment for her diagnosis, Bonnie reports that due to the potential side effects of Herceptin, she was closely monitored and will be followed for a full 10 years. Early on, Bonnie experienced some of the common side effects, including bone aches and tingling in her feet, which have since reversed. Thankfully, scans have shown that there was no damage to her heart.

Bonnie's advice for someone considering a clinical trial is to verify how the costs will be covered before enrolling. She warns, "You don't want to be dropped from insurance because you are on a clinical trial." In Bonnie's case, Herceptin, subsequent bloodwork and heart scans were all paid for by the study, while the standard treatments she received were billed through her insurance company.



Survivor **Bonnie Olson**

Diagnosis  
HER2 positive  
breast cancer

Years of Survivorship **8**

*"I have a daughter and I just felt that if I could do something to help prevent further generations [from getting breast cancer], that made sense to me."*

The Susan G. Komen for the Cure® promise is to save lives and end breast cancer forever.

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While not all clinical trials turn out as expected, Bonnie's trial was a success, proving that Herceptin could be used to treat HER2 positive breast cancers in an adjuvant setting. As a result, Herceptin has become standard therapy for patients with these kinds of tumors.

In addition to enduring all of the physical and psychological issues that came with her diagnosis, Bonnie also suffered the loss of her job. She called the day before her lumpectomy and was told that because she had only been working for the company for six weeks, the company would not hold her job while she underwent treatment. Bonnie was furious and she asked her surgeon, "How can some company do this?!"

***"Clinical trials truly are the only way that we can find out how these new things happen and help people and progress in care. I feel very, very fortunate that I happened to be able to be a part of that."***

The outrage of losing her job was coupled with the realization that her only other experience with breast cancer was "watching someone die," Bonnie knew that she had to help raise hope and awareness among other women who shared her fears.

### **INVOLVEMENT WITH KOMEN**

Six months into her treatment, when Bonnie found out that her surgeon volunteered for the Susan G. Komen for the Cure® Southwest Florida Affiliate, which was just six months old at the time, she began speaking at Affiliate events while she was still wearing her headscarf. She quickly took on the posts of Secretary and Treasurer.

Bonnie soon became immersed in the work of the Affiliate and went on to serve as the Executive Director (E.D.) and is currently the Grants Chair. As the E.D., she says her top priority as a breast cancer survivor was "to get out as much education about this disease as possible..." She also helped the Affiliate expand their service area from two to five counties.

As the Grants Chair, Bonnie keeps her own experience at the forefront when working with people in the community. She says, "It was devastating to think of all that I went through...I couldn't imagine going through all of that without insurance." Bonnie is proud of the work the Affiliate is doing in Florida, including grants to neighborhood clinics that are available to the working poor, working with local hospitals to get cost effective mammograms and treatment for the uninsured as well as a patient navigation program for migrant workers.

### **KOMEN'S INVESTMENT IN HERCEPTIN**

Susan G. Komen for the Cure has been investing in research related to HER2 positive breast cancers for two decades. To date, we've invested over \$41 M in over 100 different research projects beginning with an award to Dr. Edison Liu in 1992 to explore how making too many copies of genes helps HER2 positive breast cancer progress.

Three of our Promise Grants, the largest awards that Komen gives, are focused in this area. The two largest, \$5M and \$6.75 M are testing prevention strategies ranging from potentially significant compounds found in plants to studying signals in cells that help breast cancer progress. The third Promise Grant focuses on how the HER3 and HER2 proteins interact to try to learn why some targeted therapies don't work on HER2 positive breast cancers and find new targets for therapy.

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