

## **A True Cancer Warrior**

“Cancer Took a lot Out of My Life, but it didn’t Take My Life”

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*Brittnee Reed*

At the age of 26, many women have begun turning their dreams of having a steady career, marriage, and babies into a reality. However at 26 years old, things were anything from a fairytale for my cousin, Lisa Johnson. On April 28, 2010, Lisa was diagnosed with Stage 3 Colorectal Cancer (cancer of the rectum), a cancer that is more commonly found in a person age 50 and over. “I remember the exact moment I was told I had cancer. It was on a Wednesday at 3:21 pm. When the doctor broke the news to me I tried to speak but no words came out. I tried to breathe but, still, I couldn’t catch my breath.” stated Johnson. All of Johnson’s hopes and dreams quickly faded away as a new reality of hospitals, surgeries, and chemotherapy, fast approached. As much as she wished to hold onto the past, nothing would ever be the same.

Although Rectal Cancer is the second leading cause of cancer related deaths in the United States, colonoscopies, used to detect the cancer cells, are not recommended by doctors until the age of 50. Yet, whether you are 50, or in Johnson’s case as young as 26, there are symptoms to be aware of. “My symptoms began with constipation, then moved on to abdomen bloating when I tried fiber supplements. After sometime I began to notice blood in my stool, first it was here and there and a small amount, later on it was all the time and more blood than stool.”, she explained. Yet the symptoms didn’t stop there. Johnson had throbbing pain in her tailbone and what she described to me as “severe, sharp, constant, stabbing pain” in her inner, right buttock. “It was that pain that made me finally go to the doctor because I couldn't sleep, I couldn't sit, I couldn't stand. It was just massive pain 24/7.” she stated.

Johnson never dreamed in a million years that she would be sitting in a doctor’s office hearing the phrase, “You have cancer”, as she was diagnosed with a 7cm long tumor, blocking

90% of her rectum passageway. To make matter worse, the cancerous cells had spread past her tumor and onto nearby lymph nodes. From that moment on, the life she once knew had disappeared and it was time to adjust to this unexpected twist. “When I was first diagnosed, everything happened so quickly I didn't really have much time to digest what was happening before I started chemo. All of my doctors kept saying ‘we don't have time to react, we just have to act’ so that is exactly what we did.” she explained. Medical offices became Johnson’s second home and being that her cancer journey was so peculiar, obvious emotions of fear, anxiety, and terror ran through her head, “I knew that I needed to focus all my will on positive energy so I poured everything I had into staying positive, upbeat, and resilient.” she said.

Before chemotherapy began, Johnson had a chest port implanted. In simple terms, a chest port feeds a catheter straight into the artery so that chemo can be infused through it and blood can be drawn. After the chest port was implanted, Johnson underwent six weeks of 24hr-continuous-infusion of “5FU” chemotherapy that was infused through her body every Monday through Friday, “I had to eat, sleep, and shower while being infused the whole week.”, she said. Over the course of her cancer journey, Johnson had 28 pelvic radiation treatments, surgery to remove the tumor and personal functions of the body, a second type of chemotherapy, treatment at the cancer center every other week for six months, followed by a third type of chemotherapy.

Johnson had faith that all of the treatments and the tumor removal surgery would be worth it in the end. She hoped that it was enough to get rid of her cancer for good and bring back a sense of normalcy to her life. Sadly on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011, she was re-diagnosed with Stage 3 Rectal Cancer, just four months after being in remission. As devastating as the news was, Johnson knew she had to be strong and get ready to fight the battle of cancer once again.

Today the world is starting to look brighter for Johnson. Her latest CT scan came back with fantastic results stating that there are no signs of cancerous cells infecting her body. Although she has been in remission since last October, cancer will never be too far from her mind. There are still the daily struggles of what could have been had it not been for Rectal Cancer. Johnson said, “I struggle with not being able to have children, but then I remind myself how incredibly lucky I am to not only be given a second chance, but also a third chance at life. So many people never get that second chance so I am constantly reminding myself that yes cancer took a lot out of my life, but it didn’t take my life.”

As Johnson looks to the future, she hopes that one day, she will be able to start a family with her husband, Chad. Also, she aspires to write a book and continue to educate others about early screening/detection for Rectal Cancer Awareness. She has created an online blog entitled, *Goodbye Dancer, Hello Cancer*, where she expresses the intimate details behind her story. “I would like to remind other cancer patients that from the very second you hear the words "you have cancer" you are a warrior and you are a survivor. That even though hell on earth may lie in front of you, HOPE is the strongest weapon in any battle.” she explains. When asked what she hopes women take from hearing her story Johnson stated that it is important to not let embarrassment stop you from getting checked for Rectal Cancer; there is nothing to be embarrassed about and “an awkward five minutes could ultimately save your life.”

Before the word “cancer” became part, if not all of Johnson’s world, she was living the life of any typical mid-20’s woman. She had many joys to celebrate such as: her recent marriage to longtime boyfriend, graduating from Fairmont State with a bachelor’s degree in Psychiatry, and taking on a new job at the local high school where she could teach girls her lifelong passion of dance. Her story is the epitome of why it is important to not take things for granted, because

everything can change in an instant. Educate yourself and know the signs of Rectal Cancer. If you have any of these symptoms go to the doctors right away, if not for your sake then for your loved ones. Loosing someone is hard and I can only imagine what would have happened if my cousin Lisa Johnson did not finally get the courage to go to the doctors. She is a beautiful, brave, and strong woman; my hero; and I am thankful she is still here with us.

If you would like to access Lisa Johnson's blog please visit: <http://goodbyedancerhellcancer.blogspot.com/>