

Fighting cancer stereotypes A young woman's journey back to health

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“Just incredible disbelief and fear — I was completely shocked and overwhelmed.”

Misty Watson of Eupora was 29 years old, in great physical shape, and with no prior family medical history when she was diagnosed with colon cancer.

“I immediately started picturing the end of my life,” Watson said. “I had always associated cancer with death.”

She had always had a “sensitive stomach,” but in March 2008, something was different.

“Honestly it was difficult to differentiate the pain from other normal abdominal pains,” Watson said. “The pain was not a crippling ache that would be alarming enough to send you to the ER. It was just a dull ache that somehow felt more focused in one area and did not seem to go away. Something just felt different.”

At first, she said the pain was slight and sporadic, but as time passed it became more intense and constant. On a weekend trip home, the abdominal pain intensified and by Monday morning she went to see a family physician.

“My family doctor did not mention the actual word cancer. He said there was a significant amount of blood in my intestines and although most likely it was just an infection or possibly a polyp, that it was important to get it checked out right away just to be safe,” Watson said. “I don’t think any of the doctors or nurses thought it was cancer simply because I was so young and healthy seeming.”

Only about one percent of people diagnosed with colon cancer are under the age of 34.

It was overwhelming. Friends and family would call and going over and over the story was too much. Between the diagnosis and the biopsy, life was a blur.

“I was never technically in denial,” Watson said. “It felt surreal at times but I accepted the diagnosis immediately. I was angry and upset but never in denial.”

It was the worry and the emotional stress that crushing for Watson.

“For me that was one of the most difficult parts,” Watson said. “Besides the physical side effects, just the constant stress and worry in addition to everyday life was very hard to deal with. I was surprised at how hard the emotional side effects hit me and how isolated I felt at times. I tried to maintain my normal life as much as possible to counteract the emotional stress. Talking with other people going through similar situations helped the most.”

It was six and a half months from her diagnosis following a colonoscopy that confirmed cancer to the end of the Folfox chemotherapy.

Folfox Chemotherapy is currently the most common chemotherapy regimen given for colon cancer to kill cancer cells. It’s made up of two drugs ((FOL) fluorouracil (F) and Oxalipatin (OX)) and is given in two parts.

“On the first day I would go in for the Oxalipatin infusion which was monitored and usually took around four hours,” Watson said. “The second part (Fluorouracil) was given in a pump that hooked to my port and was released over the next couple of days at home. This three day process completed a single round of chemotherapy. The treatments were bi-weekly for six months.”

It was her family that helped keep her spirits up played a huge role in Watson’s recovery. Watson is the daughter of Robert and Joyce Watson of Eupora. Her siblings include Scott Watson of Long Beach, Shannon Watson Zenor of Madison and Paige Watson of Jackson.

“They offered unconditional support throughout my treatment,” Watson said. “My mom would listen to me complain and cry for hours with a sympathetic ear when I was feeling down. My sisters were a big help too. I can’t count how many times Shannon drove me to and from doctors’ appointments and waited patiently by my side. I could not have done it without my whole family. They constantly tried to do nice things for me and check and make sure I was doing well. Thank goodness I have a big family.”

Watson is a 1997 Eupora High School graduate and a 2002 graduate of Mississippi State University. She moved to Jackson to live with her sister, Paige, and work as the corporate sales and customer service manager for Bass Pecan Company.

Working when she was able, help Watson maintain a bit of normalcy during an abnormal time of her life.

“My employer was very supportive and understanding when it came to time off from work for treatment,” Watson said. “I was allowed to come and go when I felt up to it. I did try and work as much as possible on days I felt stronger. Working took my mind off the situation and helped me feel normal for a short while.”

Her faith also played a big role in discovering the inner strength it took to battle cancer.

“I’ve always been a Christian who turns to prayer for answers and comfort so immediately I began to pray once I received the news,” Watson said. “I believe prayer is what allowed me to have the strength to make it through the treatment. At times, when I became frustrated it was easy to ask ‘Why me God?’ but at the end of the day you just can’t look at it that way. I chose to trust that God was looking out for me and had a plan. My faith became much stronger from it all.”

At the end of the chemotherapy treatments, she was pronounced “free and clear” of all cancer cells. It was the hardest thing she has ever gone through, but at the end, she has a new appreciation for life.

at <http://www.Colondar.com>. All proceeds support the Colon Club.

“I learned that I am a much stronger person than I ever dreamed I could be and how much I take for granted in everyday life,” Watson said. “I also learned how important it is to allow people to help when they want to help. I’ve always been a very independent person so allowing people to do things for me was an adjustment. I learned which people in my life are people I can depend on and, unfortunately, I learned who I cannot depend on. It was an eye opening experience that made me appreciate life like never before.”

After “wrapping her head” around the diagnosis, she began researching colon cancer online. That was how she found The Colon Club. Connecting with the site helped provide perspective and insight. And being selected “Miss January 2011” is a fun way to spread a message of hope.

“I feel extremely honored especially being the first person chosen from Mississippi,” Watson said. “It was such a rewarding experience and I’m thrilled to be able to do something that will raise awareness and hopefully help other survivors feel more comfortable with their scars and diagnosis.”

Watson named Miss January

If a picture’s worth a thousand words, a young colon cancer survivor’s scar is worth a thousand more.

The 2011 Colondar, just released by nonprofit group The Colon Club, features Eupora’s Misty Watson as Miss January, along with 11 other men and women from around the country.

The 2011 Colondar is the 7th edition of this annual calendar featuring survivors all diagnosed under the stereotypical age of 50.

“The 2011 Colondar is another stunning take on young colorectal cancer survivors who proudly show off their surgical scars and share their extraordinary personal stories, proving that this is a disease that can happen to anyone, at any age,” said president and co-founder Molly McMaster. The 2011 Colondar models are mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, boyfriends, and girlfriends. Each shares a unique, jaw-dropping story of diagnosis, and an inspirational story of hope.

The 2011 Colondar features a total of six men and seven women who “bear their bellies” and show their surgical scars to let people know that colon cancer DOES happen to young people, too.

“Colorectal cancer is the second leading cancer in the United States. We meet more and more young survivors each year who show us that colorectal cancer IS happening to those who are younger, and we are very determined to do something about that,” said McMaster.

The award-winning Colondar is becoming increasingly well-known throughout the colorectal cancer community and beyond. Now in its 7th year, a total of 102 have posed for the Colondar, and over 55,000 are now in circulation all over the world. Inspired by Erika Kratzer, a stage IV colon cancer survivor diagnosed at age 22, the Colondar serves to spread her message of survival – even when there seems to be little to no hope.

To read more about Watson’s story, visit www.Colondar.com. Each 2011 Colondar costs \$16.50, including shipping and handling, and is available for purchase