

Embarking on one of life's most profound journeys

By Diane Martin

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would be the President of a Lymphedema Association. I had never even heard of the word lymphedema. Then things changed permanently for me in ways both subtle and significant, when I was diagnosed with breast cancer and later, lymphedema. I embarked on one of life's most profound journeys.

I was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 2000. My father had recently passed away just two weeks after being diagnosed with cancer and that was still fresh in my mind. All I could think of when my doctor told me I had breast cancer, was that I had only two weeks to live as well. I remember thinking I didn't want to die. I wanted to grab and hold tight to my husband Doug and be with my family. I endured surgery, six months of chemotherapy and one month of radiation.

In 2002 I was showing my Old English sheepdog and somehow cut my finger. I was concerned not to get blood on my dog and applied a band-aid. However, from the cut I ended up with a serious infection called cellulitis. This is what started my journey, living with lymphedema. I remember thinking that my arm was swelling because my cancer was back and so I was relieved to find out it was

not cancer. Little did I realize at the time that the lymphedema would be a constant reminder for me of the cancer.

Then in 2007 I was diagnosed with breast cancer again. This time I went through surgery and six months of very strong chemotherapy. I think that as hard as it was to go through the cancer treatment it still was not as hard as being diagnosed with lymphedema. It might have been because I knew what cancer was and knew what the treatment would be but knew nothing about lymphedema.

I do not remember my surgeon, oncologist or any health professional talking to me about what I should or should not do to protect myself from lymphedema post-breast cancer. Once I found out

that I had lymphedema I started to call clinics looking for answers to my questions and to find out about treatment. After a very long search I finally found a certified lymphedema therapist (Kirsten) who not only got my swollen arm down to a size that I could put a normal shirt on, but also had the answers to the questions I had been asking about lymphedema.

While I was being treated, Kirsten and I talked about how hard it was for me to find

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someone that could help me and that I could not be the only person that was looking for help and education about lymphedema. We ultimately gathered together a group of people that would be willing to help and most importantly volunteer their time to get an association going to help lymphedema patients. After many forms, phone calls, emails and hard work we established ourselves as the Alberta Lymphedema Association in Calgary in August of 2003.

We have grown a lot over the past 11 years and have touched many people with lymphedema. We have connected patients to other patients, helped patients by sending information to their physicians and worked hard to advocate and raise awareness for this condition. We also collaborated with other provinces and supported each other with information and documents to help support local efforts.

In 2014 our association made history by working with the Alberta Health Services and being the first province to have treatment fully funded for not only cancer-related lymphedema patients but primary and non-cancer lymphedema patients as well. I am so proud of what we have accomplished so far. I will continue to advocate and help educate anyone that needs to know about lymphedema. It will be an exciting day when lymphedema is a word that all people will know. **LP**



Diane Martin is a second generation Calgarian married to another second generation Calgarian (Doug). She is President of the Alberta Lymphedema Association and also volunteers with the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation and the Famous 5 Foundation. Diane enjoys being a member of the Sistership Breast Cancer Dragon Boat team.