

Tenacious: Heroic Stories from Cancer Survivors

By Oakley Weddle

[ACT 1] Sometimes you need to know that even though things look really bad right now, and are really scary right now, that doesn't mean you should give up. Yeah, it might still be okay. [30]

[VO 1] 18.1 million. In 2018 alone, there were 18.1 million new cases of cancer and 9.5 million cancer related deaths worldwide. By 2040, the number of new cancer cases per year is expected to rise to 29.5 million and the number of cancer related deaths to 16.4 million, according to cancer.gov.

To put it into greater perspective. According to trugenx.com, one in two women, and one in three men are likely to get cancer in their lifetime. These are frightening odds.

I sat down with two brave women recently from wildly different backgrounds to discuss and dissect their cancer journey with me from what it was like at diagnosis during surgery, pandemic and before, and what it has been like on this road to recovery. Finding hope, faith, love, and advocacy along the way proved to be extremely valuable to these women and helped shaped who they are today. [3.00]

[ACT 1] I turned 50 last April, and you know, you're supposed to get a colonoscopy when you turn 50, yay. Getting older. And, uh, I already had just a regular checkup scheduled with my doctor for like a month after that. And so, I went and saw her and she's like, oh, Hey, you're 50 now. And guess what? It's time for it. And so she said, you know, like a lot of people are freaked out about going and having procedures done and being in facilities. So there's this other option you can do. That's a, it's an at home screening test and you can do that for this year. And assuming it comes back fine, then in like three years, we'll get you on track with your regular colonoscopy. I said, okay, that sounds fine. So, I did that and it came back positive and that's not a huge deal in and of itself because it does have like a 12% false, positive, false negative rate.

What it does mean is you have to go and have a colonoscopy. So I did that. That was, um, in June, June 22nd. And the doctor said, well, um, there was a thing and it didn't look good. And I think he knew right away what it was, but he couldn't say that to me. And so, you know, he said, well, we'll see what the pathology says, but regardless it needs to come out. So find a surgeon. And then three days later, he called me and said it was cancer, but now keep in mind. So, I only found out about this because I turned 50 and it was time for me to do something about it for all practical purposes. It wasn't really even having any symptoms. I didn't have family history of cancer, of colon cancer, but my dad had polyps and diverticulitis. And what I found out when I had my colonoscopy was that made me high-risk. And so I should have started getting screened when I was 45 instead of when I was 50, but nobody ever told me that. So I didn't know. So, I got the phone call June 25th and on July 21st I had surgery. So, it was a lump a little bit less than a month. [9.50]

[VO 1] While I found there are many similarities between these two women. Susan Trott has had a slew of diagnosis and hospital visits throughout her lifetime. And whilst the Leah had her diagnosis, when she was 50 trot, first discovered the cancer at a much younger age.

[ACT 2]

I've always looked healthy. The summer after ninth grade though, somewhere after 10th grade, um, I kept getting spiking fevers 104, and then they'd go down and I'd feel fine. And then I'd spike it again. Um, and it go down. And so my parents had me tested over and over again, they thought, oh, it's mononucleosis. Um, but all of those tests kept coming back negative from there. Um, we'd moved to a different city...town. The day 11th grade was going to start; I couldn't get out of bed. And, and I mean, my fever was at 104 and I couldn't move. So my parents took me to the hospital and, um, I was admitted and I was put in quarantine, um, for two weeks. And, um, that kept running Mono spots. They did, um, testing me for leukemia. Did liver biopsy, bone marrow biopsy, spinal taps. Um, and eventually it came back as mono.

So, for two years, my last two years of high school, I only went to high school half a day, but you know, I felt fine; except tired. I would literally come home, eat lunch and take a nap, but live life pretty normally, um, went to college and, um, in classroom, uh, just dealing though my neck, I felt a lump that hadn't been there before. And so, um, I just kept a watch on it and it wasn't going away. So I told my parents about it. So, I went home during my birthday and had a biopsy and it came back, which I had no idea what that was. Um, but they said, it's just a sound so malformation and we just need to keep watch on it. So I just kept getting more and more lumps in my neck. And so, by the end of that school year, um, my sophomore school year in college, um, came home and had another biopsy and it came back Hodgkin's disease, which is cancer of the system.

So, from there, I, um, was flown to San Antonio, Texas. My dad was air force and they had a huge teaching hospital there. And so they did further testing. Um, they removed my spleen because your spleen is like a large lymph node and Hodgkin's diseases cancer. The time is 1980 and, um, five years prior, I probably would have died with Hodgkin's disease, but they had come, you know, with treatment with the radiation, they'd come a long way. And, um, so I wasn't fearful. I was a 19 year old is in San Antonio for three months. And then every spring break, every Christmas break, every beginning of summer, every end of summer, I'd go for a re-evaluation. So after three years and I have no recurrence, all was good after college got married, had children shortly after with both of my pregnancies. Um, I had blood clots blocked colon.

Um, my first pregnancy I hemorrhaged afterwards. So, with both pregnancies, I was in the hospital for a month. Um, my both children were premature, but got better from that. Um, and then in 1999, I was diagnosed with breast cancer in my left breast. And, um, I had a mastectomy and then chemo and that went well. And, um, five years later I was diagnosed in my right breast and had a mastectomy from there. Um, I had to be on blood thinners and take and wear compression has on my legs. And, um, yeah. And then from there, um, I've had 42 basal cell carcinomas removed, um, two melanomas removed. Um, but here I am. [9.30]

[VO 1]

Not only did Selia get diagnosed during a pandemic. She had her surgery during a surge in cases and tight restrictions. The hospital kept her from having anything but normal experience.

[ACT 1]

I had, I had my surgery in the middle of the pandemic, which was awful, because nobody could be with me. Um, you know, like, I don't know how tight restrictions are still now, but last summer it was, everything was just locked down tight. So my husband could come with me to the hospital and like, uh, they let him see me. Well, I was going to say

before they took me back, but really it wasn't even, it was, I mean, it was before they took me like to be prepped. So it was a good two hours before my, you know, it wasn't like he saw me right before I went to surgery. So, they let him bring me and basically dropped me off. And then they, they told me that he was going to be allowed to see me after surgery, but in reality, what that wound up being, which I don't even remember because of the drugs, but, um, what it wound up being was they told him I was done.

And uh, like he was, he was in the room that I was going to be in when they brought me out to recovery. And so they wheeled me from recovery to the room and he was still in there. So like he physically laid eyes on me and they made him leave. Right. Uh, so like we couldn't talk, he couldn't be with me and they would let him back in the hospital after that. So, I was in the hospital for four days by myself, after that with no visitors allowed, um, went home and started chemo a month later. And so, then went through chemo, thankfully, um, west, even though the pandemic, they allowed you to bring one person with you. So I at least didn't have to do that by myself. And that went on from August 31st to February 11th. Basically, I kind of had to go through everything by myself and just wait until I was back at my house [00:12:00] to have friends and family, you know? So, um, the hospital was obviously the most strict part about it. I had my colon surgery, July 21st and then I had my port put in July 31st. And then in September I had to go to the ER one day because I was having chest pains and I called, um, my doctor to find out [00:12:30] what I needed to do. And she said, there's a chance she could have blood clots. So you need to go to the ER and get checked out. So I did, and I did, I had, um, blood clots in both my lungs

[6.00]

[VO 1] After the initial surgery, you also can forget these women continue a forever life journey. [12]

[ACT 1] So now I actually just saw my oncologist last week and, um, had a cat scan. So right now there's no sign of any grade. My blood work was good. My scans were clean. [15]

[VO 1] Trott was rest assured that during her journey, her faith would get her through [8]

[ACT 2] My faith and God. Um, knowing that whatever occurred, um, he had me in his hands and when I was younger, um, and my faith wasn't as strong. I think I thought I was invincible anyway. I wish young and stupid. Um, but, um, as years have gone on and with my health and other families, health and deaths in the family, which is a part of life, um, I just saw his hand working in that. And so my faith and my friends, um, and my family, um, were all very supportive and, um, through all of it, I, um, I'm not a hypochondriac, but if something might right, I'm going to the doctor, cause I'm still here. And medicine, you know, keeps improving and diagnostics keep improving. [1.50]

[VO 1] Through this journey, so Selia has turned to advocacy, through social media and constant conversations, she has been helping people more than they know. [20]

[ACT 1] I will tell anybody who will listen to me talk. So, um, I recently had knee surgery because why not? So let's just have some elective knee surgery. Um, so I'm in physical therapy. And, uh, so I was explaining all this to her. And so she asked me about the cancer and I was like, great question. Let me tell you. And so, uh, I was explaining to her the

importance of getting screened because I like, I didn't know that I was high risk just because my dad had polyps. You know, I just knew we didn't have colon cancer in the family. So I didn't think polyps specifically made me high-risk, um, cause people hear colon cancer and they think it's for old people that only old people get colon cancer. And that's wildly untrue. Not only, I mean, I know I'm not young anymore, but I'm not old.

I'm 50, now I'm 51. And, but you would be surprised how many people in like the 25 to 40 age range are getting diagnosed with colon cancer and not like early stage one, colon cancer. These people have stage three and stage four, colon cancer and stage four means that it has spread to other parts of your body. So it's either in your lymphatic system or it's in other organs like your liver and your lungs. And so, it's a really big deal and it's really scary and hard to fight. And people 30 in their early and mid-thirties are getting colon cancer now. So, um, screening is incredibly important, especially if you have a family history.

So, the way my gastroenterologist explained it to me is if you have a primary family member, which is a parent child or sibling who has a history of polyps, diverticulitis, ulcerative colitis, or Crohn's or colon cancer, then that makes you high risk. And you should start getting screened at, um, 10 years before their age at diagnosis. So as an example, if my dad was 45, the first time he had Apollo than I should have got started getting screened when I was 35. So many people hear the word colonoscopy and freak out and think, oh my God, that's gross. And it's going to hurt. And the preciousness and it takes a long time and I just don't want to do it. And I'm here to tell you is really not that big of a deal. So yes, there is crap involved. That's not fun. It's not the way we want to spend 24 hours, but it's not, it's not bad. You either take some pills or you drink some stuff. It depends on what they prescribed for you. And you stay near a bathroom the day before your procedure, and then you don't eat anything after midnight.

And then you go, and they give you some nice happy drugs and you go to sleep and you don't know what is happening to you. And you wake up and it's all over and you don't feel anything. I mean, like you're not sore. You don't hurt physically when it's over. Like I said, not the way you would choose to spend a day, but it's not awful. It doesn't hurt. And if it will catch cancer or something precancerous, that's going to turn into cancer. It is so worth it because it is so much easier to treat. If you can catch it early or catch it as a polyp before it starts, where they can just snip it and take it out, then having to go through everything I went through. So yes, I will preach it all day long.

[4.00]

[VO 1] I was so honored to interview these women. Their stories are so incredibly inspiring through my talks with them, I really started to realize that we can get kind of too lost in our own world. Sometimes we go about our day, not thinking about those struggling. It's not until our own dark night that we appreciate an egg for the ones hurting. There are unimaginable things that have happened to both these women, but yet through it all, they're helping people. They're loving their life and are taking it day by day with deep gratitude that they are here. [1.15]

[ACT 2] I'm just grateful to be here, uh, after my Hopkin's, when I was younger and then getting married and having children and having so many issues with those pregnancies, I really

didn't think I'd make it the 30 and, um, twice that now. So, um, I'm just thankful for that. [35]

[ACT 1] Um, unfortunately it's kind of a situation where, okay, today it looks like it's gone, but tomorrow it might not. So, um, today we just be thankful. We just get to be thankful that for today it looks like it's gone and hope that it stays that way. [20]

[VO 1] 18.1 million cases, one in women, one in three men, there are people all around you on a cancer journey. [12]