



### **Victoria Ballesteros' Story**

In June 2009, I was by all accounts a very healthy woman: I was training for my first triathlon, working full time, volunteering in my community and was an active single mom with my 10-year-old son. One day, I felt a large lump on the right side of my neck that was causing food to get stuck whenever I swallowed. I saw my physician and she requested a neck ultrasound, and ultimately a nodule biopsy (fine needle aspiration). When the results came back, the doctor said the nodule was benign (not cancerous) but still recommended surgery to remove it. In December 2009, I awoke from the surgery alone in my hospital room. The surgeon came in and informed me that I had undergone a total thyroidectomy due to the discovery of multiple malignant nodules with cancer in my lymph nodes. I was shocked and unprepared to find myself at 38 years old with metastatic papillary thyroid cancer – just like my father, who was diagnosed more than 20 years before. Prior to walking out of the room, the surgeon patted me on the leg and told me not to worry – that I had gotten ‘the best cancer you can get.’ As he left, I felt utterly devastated and afraid.

The effects of thyroid cancer are felt daily. In the days following surgery, my parathyroids, which regulate calcium, went into shock. My body wasn't producing any calcium, and as a result, my face was numb, my hands and feet were cramping severely, and my doctors were concerned my heart might give out. Nothing they tried to elevate my calcium levels worked, and, due to the constant blood tests – every four hours for seven days – the veins in my arms collapsed. A few weeks after this unexpected hospital stay, I received radioactive iodine ablation, a very common treatment for papillary or follicular thyroid cancer, and again I found myself isolated from my son. The strain from our separation left me feeling anxious and depressed.

Over the next six years, I had to see eight different doctors including the nuclear medicine physician, several endocrinologists, a cardiologist and a psychiatrist for my increasing anxiety. I learned everything that I could about thyroid cancer through books, websites, and in-person support groups. I have been advocating for myself since I learned I had cancer, and I've begun to accompany my father to his endocrinologist appointments to advocate for him as well.

There are so many ways that cancer weaves itself into one's life after diagnosis. I take medicine every day to replace the function of my missing thyroid gland, and my energy levels fluctuate, as does my weight. I am unable to control my body temperature and have trouble sleeping. Having thyroid cancer and knowing that I could have a recurrence at any time causes me anxiety. I have needed bloodwork every three months for the last six years, and it never gets easier. The

frequent blood draws are a cycle of fear and anxiety. Every three months I hold my breath as I wait for my doctor to tell me that all is clear.

There have been significant changes to my social and work life as well. For me, there's always the question of dating, and how or when do I tell someone that I have cancer. Will he run for the hills? Also, at what point – if at all – do I tell my employer? What if I'm passed over for a promotion because my boss thinks I can't handle the extra work? Will my co-workers feel sorry for me? So many considerations come to mind.

Also, when you get cancer, your whole family is impacted. Since my diagnosis, I have received incredible support from my family. However, sometimes I wanted to just cry and be scared and be ok with that, but I had to put on a brave face for others, especially my son. I would love to just take a break from it all!

In spite of all this, there are still many positive aspects of my life. Six months after my diagnosis, as I was confronting my own mortality, I decided to pursue a goal of mine. While still undergoing treatment, I started taking classes at the University of Southern California (USC). The school motto, "Fight on!", was so appropriate for my situation. It took me several years, but in 2013 I graduated with my Master's Degree in communication management, and was selected class speaker. I recently started an amazing job with the Screen Actors Guild that I love, and my boss has been incredibly supportive. Most importantly, my son is now 16 years old and, as a result of all we have been through together, we are closer than ever. Every now and then I even get outside and throw a football with him, shoot hoops, or go for long walks – just like we used to before I had cancer.

Victoria Ballesteros is a paid consultant to Eisai, Inc.