



Playing Her Cards: Janice Petrelli has the winning hand over cancer

Janice Petrelli grew up playing card games with her family. When she recently faced a cancer diagnosis twice in one year, “playing the hand you are dealt” became a metaphor for her life. “I believe that life gives you a hand and you play the hand you are dealt,” says Petrelli. “I was not going to fold.”

In February of 2007 Petrelli’s gynecologist found a mass between her vagina and rectum during a routine GYN exam. She had no symptoms and when the tumor was removed and biopsied, Petrelli’s diagnosis was peritoneal carcinoma, a rare form of cancer. She was 31 years old.

During her 18 weeks of chemotherapy Petrelli’s strength was zapped and she found everything was an effort – especially running her event planning business Perfect Planning. But through it all, Petrelli still worked and tried to keep up a good attitude.

“I feel like your fate is your fate and there is nothing you can do about it. You can cry, but you still cancer. Okay. I have cancer - now what am I going to do? I’m just going to cope with it. If God gave this to me to help others than I know it was worth it,” she says.

Still she admits that the day she shaved her head was hard. “It was the one day that I allowed myself to cry,” she says. “My hair had been my identifier and my bald head made my unrecognizable. Until then I didn’t feel like a cancer patient.”

A January CT scan showed that Petrelli was cancer-free and she felt great.

Then a May follow up visit to the doctor revealed that the cancer had returned and a tumor was in her vagina. This time Petrelli opted to go back to her home state of New York and

was treated at Sloan Kettering. Her 9.5 hour operation, in September 2008, required a hysterectomy, temporary ileostomy, removal of part of the rectum and lymph nodes, as well as vaginal reconstruction. She was cut from her diaphragm to her pubic bone and required 54 staples. In November, a final surgery reversed the ileostomy.

Healing was rough, remembers Petrelli. "You really don't appreciate your body until it doesn't work the way it always has," she says. "Cancer is exhausting and it's a full-time job – operations, chemotherapy, and meds. It is emotionally, physically, mentally, and financially draining." She is thankful to her parents (as well as family and friends) for their support throughout her cancer experience, and because she has always worked hard with her business she was able to pay her bills.

Now her main focus is to get well. She had to endure another 6 months of maintenance chemotherapy. If this cancer returns again, there are no more treatment options for Petrelli, and she wants to use her experience with cancer to help others. She believes that her cancer has opened doors of opportunity for her. "I truly believe that I'm here to share my story and to help others," says Petrelli, who is writing a book about her experiences. "Writing has been great therapy for me. I feel like everything that I've had to overcome in my life has prepared me for the biggest fight of my life."

She has also co-founded a cancer support group for women 45 and younger who are battling or have battled cancer. "We're a unique age group of women who are single or married with young children, have careers, and need the support of each other," she says. The group, "Healing Hands," will have monthly two-hour meetings that will combine information with social time. For more information, email Janice Petrelli at healinghandsgrp@aol.com.