

## **How Orange & White Helped Save My Life**

by Jan-Marie Merrill

It's quite easy for some people to dismiss Hooters as 'that' restaurant. You know, scantily clad girls serving beer and chicken wings. The concept – still the original, still the standard – unfortunately has gotten more than its share of vulgarized misconceptions and perverse misinterpretations. I am, however, always happy and filled with pride to dispel such misgivings.

Since its conception in 1983, and despite the qualms of naysayers and cynics alike, Hooters remains one of the most popular, recognizable, successful restaurant chains still standing today.

I had begun my new wing-slinging career with the freshness and timidity expected from a neophyte; though at 29, I had one little life-changing secret: nine years prior, I had been diagnosed with a rare form of breast cancer.

When I had my initial diagnosis at the age of 20, I was told that it was unusual but not impossible. An enlarged breast and subsequent lumpectomy had revealed five malignant lumps, infected surrounding cells and something my oncologists referred to as Stage 1. Naturally at 20, I felt I had been issued a death sentence. I even prepared a will.

The year following my diagnosis, I begrudgingly agreed to undergo radiation therapy. Due to my young age and being an unsuitable candidate for surgery, a mastectomy wasn't ever an option to consider. When radiation produced little to no change, I then agreed to undergo the more effective solution of chemotherapy.

For several months thereafter, I went without a single health concern. Not so much as a runny nose. No cancer, no chemo, no worries. That is until 2001 when a routine check-up exposed that not only had my cancer returned more aggressively, but it was mutative and metastatic. I underwent treatment for more than a year.

In 2005, I had an emergency hysterectomy due to complications caused by the estrogen receptive cancer cells my body was inexplicably producing. Approximately a year later, I suffered another recurrence. Once again, I grew painfully aware that my life would most likely revolve around this dreadful curse of a disease forever. It would revolve

around my imminent fight for survival... forever. Now at Stage 3, with the presence of cancer cells in my lymphatic system, I vigorously attended my treatments; not out of logic or choice, but because of necessity. Without seeming trite, I experienced the entire array of predictable side effects: the moodiness, the nausea, the mouth sores, the lack of appetite, the indescribable aches and pains, and my least favorite – the chronic insomnia.

A lot of time passed between my initial diagnoses and starting at Hooters. I had dealt with several transitions in my life, from purchasing a home, earning my Master's Degree and acquiring my pilot's license, to getting divorced and basically starting over on my own.

I slowly began to open up to my superiors and coworkers about my illness and treatments, and my Hooters family embraced me. Albeit probably one of the unlikeliest places to find such an unshakable support system, I have learned more from them, than they can ever learn from me. From my management team to every one of my fellow orange-shorted sisters, I have received a thing so invaluable that there is no gratitude sufficient or worthy enough...Acceptance through understanding.

By the time 2009 rolled around, I was in Hooters Heaven. Freshly promoted to Regional Training Coordinator, I was surrounded by the same managers and mentors whom I had respected and admired for so long, and loving every second of it! Barely six weeks after completing my training however, I was part of an unfortunate car accident that resulted in ruptured discs in my spine and some seizure-related head trauma. Much to my chagrin, I had to take a mandatory medical leave of absence from Hooters. After my initial breast cancer diagnosis, this was the most devastating news I had ever received.

A routine MRI and evaluation a month later would reveal that my cancer cell count was "off." The results were inconclusive, but my doctors were certain of one thing: if I suffered another recurrence, my survival rate would undoubtedly diminish. Dismay turned into defeat, saddened turned into depressed, hopefulness turned into helplessness. I felt like nothing mattered. I even considered not returning to therapy. After all, I felt my best when I didn't go to therapy. When I was at Hooters working with my peers, socializing with my guests, I was inarguably at my best. So I've been told. So I believe.

After much deliberation, I unwillingly decided to heed the advice of my Cancer Care Team and begin another round of chemotherapy, though primarily on a preventative basis. My cancer cell count eventually became manageable and I was able to downgrade to oral treatments along with supplemental injections. My management team agreed to rehire me after a year long hiatus, with suitable doctor's orders and shorter shifts.

To acknowledge that they have been supportive and accommodating would be a gross understatement, and I am forever indebted. I've had the esteemed privilege to work amongst the best and brightest in the business, and countless opportunities to cultivate relationships which I feel, have been paramount to my recovery.

Today, I am still undergoing preventative chemotherapy and mandatory evaluations to upkeep my physical, mental and psychological health. Most recently, it was discovered that I have a lobular tumor on my brain, so I am taking precautions to manage that as well. I have lost both my parents to cancer in the past three years, and because I carry the same mutative genes that they had, I'll never fully be in remission or completely cancer-free.

My history with this awful disease has been painfully unpleasant and at times, seemingly unbearable. I may never be rid of it, but I intend to never lose sight of my goal: to endure. For as long as there are researchers and clinical trials, foundations and fundraisers, there will always be hope. And as long as I have Hooters, I will never lose that hope.