

Redefining Strength

by Jan-Marie Albert

As I understand it, an occupation is a job; something you do to occupy your time, for which you are paid. A career, on the other hand, defines who you are by what you do, and by that definition, means you love what you do. Being paid for doing what you love, well, that's just good fortune.

My *career* at Hooters began in the fall, 2007. It came to an unceremoniously abrupt halt about eight years later. However, even now, Hooters still serves as the unlikeliest, yet most reliable sanctuary I'll ever have, I still love everything about it and it still very much defines me.

Last year, due to a rigorous chemotherapy regimen, my body – and thusly, my brain – quickly became inept and incapable of performing simple tasks and made mere socializing and communicating with others difficult. Notably, I had been undergoing one form of chemotherapy or another for over a decade, thanks to a rare, aggressive, congenital strain of breast cancer. It was tiresome and overwhelming, but had become such a fundamental part of my daily life, that I had grown emotionally desensitized to the gravity of it all.

Early on in my Hooters career, I kept my illness very private. I wanted neither my superiors nor my coworkers to know about my condition. I wanted to be seen as the dependable, competent Hooters Girl, not some sympathy-seeking, pitiful chemo patient. I scheduled therapy around my shifts and became clever at disguising my ongoing exhaustion. However, when a routine evaluation eventually revealed that my condition had worsened, I was forced to be forthcoming about how to integrate my intensive therapy schedule into my professional life. A task seemingly simple, yet, it was one of the most difficult things I'd ever done, because I was so afraid of how I would be perceived. What a waste of worry.

My Cancer Care Team properly armed me with all of the tools necessary to prepare me for what lay ahead: required medical documents, a list of do's and don'ts, protocols for my physical and psychological upkeep... those sorts of things. What they didn't know and what I grossly underestimated however, was the fact that I already had the best – albeit improbable – remedial arsenal within my grasp: the support of my Hooters family.

Much like wildfire, my news spread rapidly; though it wasn't always within my control, I pretended like I had some choice in the manner in which others learned of my sickness. I gained the encouragement of my peers, my Management Team was nothing less than understanding, and soon, I even had guests asking me how I was feeling. This newfound attention wasn't supposed to be disconcerting - it was meant to be comforting. Discussing my condition openly was an integral part of my healing. Only nobody ever did prepare me for the potential reactions or follow-up questions that inevitably ensued.

Admittedly, I never really did mind answering; it's practically second nature to me. So much so, that my responses grew repetitive, and my attitude may have been, at times, interpreted as cavalier or downright aloof, because I did become somewhat desensitized to the subject. It was no longer 'new' to me, and somehow, I managed to subconsciously trivialize it – to make things tolerable, I imagine. What I never did quite grow accustomed to, was the praise.

Apparently, when people learn that you've been diagnosed with an illness such as breast cancer and seek treatment, you're perceived as a martyr of sorts. Naturally, opinions on this differ from person to person, but I find it both overwhelmingly humbling and inexplicably disturbing. So I didn't exactly choose to receive treatment; it was thrust upon me. Eighteen years ago I was told that radiation and chemotherapy were the only things that would save me. They phrased it just that way too. This disease, this terrible malignancy could be curbed by basically poisoning it. "Fight fire with fire," the doctors said.

That's when words like "fight," "battle," "war," first entered my cancer lexicon. They were universally used to describe anyone who had cancer. It was no longer a disease you suffered from, it was a battle you were fighting. Fighting makes you brave. Bravery says you are strong. Strong suggests you are equipped for a battle. A battle implies something that you are unmistakably up against. It even implies there's a chance of hope. I'm not sure when this first started – Heaven knows it was long before my time – but I assume that's why these words are used: to instill hope whereas there normally wouldn't be.

I never felt like I was in a fight. I've never felt like I've particularly lost or won a battle. I've been in the clear and I've had to face the chance of my own mortality. I would say that I'm lucky and loved and that I'm blessed. Sometimes cursed... Over the years, after countless conversations and regurgitated medical terms, I have heard that I am strong, I'm a survivor, I'm a fighter. I would never use those words to describe myself. It's neither vanity nor humility; I just think it's inaccurate. I don't discredit those traits or descriptions in others, only myself. Still, someone respectfully pays you a compliment by commending you on something you've seemingly achieved, yet have zero control over, and you have to say, "Thank you."

Last year, I was a Warrior.

At the beginning of a lunch shift, a Hooters Girl whom I hadn't met before, said that she had heard I was a real warrior. I had forgone my usual, gracious response, and instead of being proper, I asked why she had said that to me. Ten years my junior, green and fresh out of high school, this unassuming young woman looked right at me and very plainly replied, "because you're here." I was dumbfounded and truthfully, a little embarrassed.

She shared that she had lost her mom to breast cancer thirteen years prior and knew firsthand how the disease and more so, the treatment could affect someone. I listened to her say things that I had heard numerous times before, but never with the reverence and timid awe that she was showing just then. Surely, I had received such sentiment before, along with the support of my family and friends. Yet, in fifteen minutes, this person proceeded to tell me that she had heard how much my story had positively affected others and how much I had even affected her. She continued on, insisting I must have been strong not because I had survived breast cancer or undergone chemo, but because I was standing in front of her, at work, talking about it and not hiding away someplace in self-pity.

She called me a warrior because that's how she saw me: I didn't win any war for myself, but, by being there, I was winning a war for others. Others, like her mother, who wouldn't - or couldn't - win themselves. In fifteen minutes, she showed me that being strong wasn't always quantified by how much one could do in spite of an illness, but because of it. In just a few short minutes, she gave me the perspective and the purpose to see something in myself I hadn't quite fully identified with before - strength. The kind of strength that doesn't manifest itself blatantly, but quietly radiates a sense of power... and motivation in others... like me.

I pray that these words resonate with me for as long as I live; that they keep me ever humble and mindful. For, I am not unaware anymore; the meaningfulness of my illness and my treatment, and my attitude towards it all, is no longer lost on me. I see the importance of the effects my decisions have on others, and if I am thought to be inspiring or strong - as unbelievably unassuming though it may be - well, I am honored to be perceived that way.

Nowadays, I manage my disease with frequent evaluations, preventative treatments, diet, exercise, faith and a little something else called self-confidence. It took years to trust the process of radiation and chemotherapy, and trusting the process of my own faith and self-confidence is an ongoing process. As luck would grant me, I also got married, was able to take the time to fully concentrate on myself, and in doing so, I was able to increase my advocacy and fundraising efforts for breast cancer. Promise borne of predicament, I'd like to think.

This year, marks the fifth October in which I will be collaborating with my home store in Merritt Island, to raise money for breast cancer. They've been kind enough to allow me a platform to share my story and encourage others to support the cause. There're games, raffles, bake sales and even a walk hosted by another charity where there's a team named after me: "Jan-Marie's Rooters of Merritt Island Hooters." Every employee participates and though it's an arduous process, it's worth every minute!

My memory isn't as clear or as long as I'd like it to be, but thankfully, I think I remember the things that matter the most. Things like knowing I have a steadfast support system at home, the unquestionable reliability of my friends, the assistance of my world-class Cancer Care Team and

those at Hooters who taught me the real meaning and worth of my own strength. I am forever indebted.