

Chapter 15: A Cancer Diagnosis: Raw Emotion, Front and Center—How Your Life Changes in a Second

Laura Campbell

A Boston College staff member, Laura Campbell, vividly describes how cancer disrupted her life and, in very similar ways, affects the lives of any worker. It makes a great difference if the employer's healthcare plan and the working environment support patients in their ordeals and in the process of recovery. Hence, while her personal narrative teaches us about her individual experience, at the same time her story further highlights the ethical urgency of critically examining workplaces and healthcare systems, with the services that they provide, by paying attention to those who are left out from what could benefit their personal health and the health of the whole society.

My name is Laura Campbell, and I work in Catering at Boston College. I was diagnosed with breast cancer in November 2017. A cancer diagnosis is paralyzing. The words are suspended in air. When the doctor confirms, "Yes, it is breast cancer," you are stunned, and when the mental processing begins, you start to panic. Am I going to die? Will I need chemotherapy? Will I lose my hair? What about my family, my husband, and daughter? Why me? All these private thoughts take seconds until you gather yourself, take a deep breath, pull up your bootstraps, and ask your doctor what's next. For my breast cancer, Ductal Carcinoma in Situ, or DCIS—a contained cancer in the breast ducts—my cancer cells started to break free from the "in situ" part, thus requiring lymph node removal during my lumpectomy surgery to see if any of the escaped cells made their trek elsewhere in my body. Thankfully, they did not. The cancer was contained. It was removed with clean margins and only required twenty-one radiation treatments commencing one month after surgery. I am also taking the drug Anastrozole for five years as my cancer was estrogen positive.

I am blessed to be here to tell my story. Early detection is paramount. It saved my life. I am grateful for the excellent care of my medical team at the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston and Needham. They provided me with medical expertise, compassion, and encouragement when I needed it most, and still do to this day. I am also extremely grateful to have the health insurance that Boston College offers its employees. My financial worries were nonexistent as cancer is very, very expensive.

I am a three-year Breast Cancer Survivor. I still have my fears and anxieties as my yearly mammogram approaches. The weeks leading up to that day are challenging. Some days I am inconsolable, I go to ground, I cry, I scream, and I can get nasty to those closest to me. I wish I did not behave this way, but I do.

However, without the love and support of those closest to me—my husband Rick in particular—I do not think my outcome would have been as positive. He was and continues to be my rock.

Even before you hear these fateful words, “Yes, it is cancer,” you endure the words “maybe it is cancer.” It is like a journey that starts with the dreaded call from the hospital telling you, “We need you to come back for more imaging, we need to do an ultrasound, we need to do a needle biopsy, we need to do a breast MRI, now we need to do a guided MRI biopsy....” Well, you know the rest. It is a mentally challenging and paralyzing waiting game. If only there was a way to move this process along more smoothly and humanely. You constantly hold your breath and wait. As the singer Tom Petty (1950–2017) sang, “The waiting is the hardest part.”¹

Lastly, what I learned from this experience is that life is fleeting. We must live in this moment, for this moment is all we have. So, to all of you who are reading these words: take that trip, use the fine china, go for that walk, do not hold a grudge, call that friend, always be kind, make plans, do not wait until you retire, do it now. A close friend of mine, also a breast cancer survivor, once said to me, “Laura, we are all five minutes away.”

¹ Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, “The Waiting,” 1981, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMyCa35_mOg.

How true a statement for us all. I wish you all good health. Thank you for this opportunity to speak and allowing me to share my story.

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Since 2008, **Laura Campbell** is lead waitstaff at Boston College Heights Catering. She has been married to Rick for 33 years, and her daughter Emma graduated from Boston College in 2020. She lives in Salem, NH, and is a breast cancer survivor.