

## **“This course helped me realise I am not alone”**



My name is Maggie Stephenson. I am 67 years old and my husband and I moved from Surrey to Devon four years ago when we both retired. We live three miles outside Dulverton. We have two daughters each from previous marriages and one grandson. My working life was spent as a Personal Assistant and Office Manager.

### **When were you diagnosed with cancer?**

Two days before our wedding in May 2017 I was diagnosed with breast cancer and subsequent biopsies and scans confirmed it to be an aggressive grade 3 tumour. Despite this devastating news we had a wonderful wedding day and the breast cancer team, who were wonderful, allowed us to go on honeymoon. Immediately upon our return I was admitted to the RD&E for a mastectomy and immediate reconstruction.

### **What treatment did you receive?**

My treatment consisted of a mastectomy with immediate reconstruction, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and then hormone therapy in the form of tablets for between 7 – 10 years. My treatment proved extremely gruelling as I had a severe reaction to one of the chemotherapy drugs which caused very debilitating side effects and hospitalised me twice during chemotherapy treatment. I had a blocked PICC line which resulted in a blood clot in my arm and difficulties during radiotherapy due to excruciating nerve pain in my arm following the surgery.

### **How did you hear about FORCE and how was the charity able to help you?**

When I was first diagnosed, I was given a whole raft of literature and booklets on breast cancer which can feel totally overwhelming whilst still reeling from the initial diagnosis. I was given information about FORCE at that time but I was solely focused on facing the surgery and treatment and so I hadn't investigated what FORCE had to offer. During one of my chemotherapy sessions at Cherrybrook, one of the chemo nurses told me more about the fantastic work that FORCE does and the support it offers to cancer patients and their families. Once we stepped through the doors at FORCE my husband and I were met with so much friendliness, laughter and kindness. It became a haven of peace and tranquillity away from the gruelling cancer treatment in the main hospital. It was wonderful for us both to have the opportunity to enjoy the alternative therapies offered and for me to have nice things to look forward to, rather than the more grim visits to the main hospital. FORCE has also offered me the chance to attend courses and have treatments to help alleviate the side effects of cancer treatment. The surroundings are so relaxing and comfortable, the volunteers and staff are so helpful and friendly and the supply of tea and biscuits is endless! It has also been a lifeline for me to be able to talk everything through with a wonderful counsellor, who helped give me the courage to keep going when I was feeling so ill and dispirited whilst going through treatment and trying to cope with the dreadful side effects.

## **What drew you to the Moving Forward programme?**

I have carried on seeing my counsellor on a regular basis and we discussed my fears and anxieties about what life would be like for me once active treatment finished. She told me about the Moving Forward Programme that FORCE were planning to start and asked if I would be interested in attending the first pilot course to be run in May this year. She felt it would really help me in coming to terms with the end of active cancer treatment and facing the future without the safety net of frequent hospital appointments and the protective cloak of regular contact with all the medical team and healthcare professionals.

## **How did the sessions help?**

The end of active cancer treatment can feel like a very lonely place to be. Everyone around you is so relieved that you have come through it and that the treatment is finally over. The common expectation is that you should feel happy and elated and ready to pick up your old life where you left off at the point of your cancer diagnosis. I thought I was alone in not feeling this way and couldn't understand why I was feeling like I had been pushed off the edge of a cliff without a parachute. Cancer casts a very long shadow and although active treatment may have finished we are still faced with coping with the lingering side effects of treatment, regular scans, tests and check-up appointments and the worry and anxiety that goes hand in hand with all of these. Cancer changes you in so many ways; you feel very vulnerable and lacking in self-confidence and it is challenging to try to come to terms with "the new normal". This course helped me realise I am not alone in feeling this way. It has also given me strategies to help cope with stress and anxiety and to help me to take control during the dark times when fear and uncertainty about recurrence take the upper hand again.

## **What did you find particularly useful?**

I think one of the most useful aspects of the course for me was the opportunity to meet other people in the same situation as me, trying to face life after active treatment finishes. We all felt that we have "the sword of Damocles" hanging over our heads and can never be free from the shadow of cancer and the fear of recurrence. I met a lovely group of people and we are still in regular contact and try to support each other through worries and anxieties around ongoing treatment, scan and test results. With all the best intentions no-one can understand what we have experienced and continue to face unless they have experienced it themselves. Cancer is an exclusive club that no one wants to be a member of!

Annie and Emma, who ran the course, were so committed and passionate about aiming to make the course as meaningful and worthwhile as possible for all of us. The amount of hard work and research they put into the format of the course was clearly evident and they were always very encouraging and supportive, especially when we were dealing with issues that were upsetting or difficult to face or discuss.

## **What would you say to anyone else thinking of signing up for the course?**

What I would say to anyone thinking about signing up for this course is just to go for it and you won't regret it. Even if you are a shy person and lacking in self-confidence, (both of which I am!) don't be put off.

The courses are small in number and everyone can contribute or choose not to if they prefer, there is no pressure at all. Everyone is so supportive and friendly and no one judges you. It gives participants an opportunity to discuss their fears and uncertainties and to share their experiences with other people in the same situation and who understand how they feel. It's a small group so we felt safe to share our thoughts and feelings and to learn how others cope. Emma and Annie are very skilled and supportive and gave us lots of strategies and practical advice to help us deal with the anxieties and stress that plague us. There were a few tears but there were also lots of laughs and I have met some lovely people. We have all been changed by cancer but we are all still here. I don't know what the future holds for me but the Moving Forward course, my fellow participants, course leaders and all the wonderful people at FORCE have helped me to face the future and to look forward, not backwards.

### **Anything else you'd like to comment on?**

I would like to thank Annie and Emma for putting the course together and leading it in such a professional and compassionate manner. It was clearly evident how much hard work and research they have put into creating it. They are very skilled and knowledgeable and of course they are both absolutely lovely! I would also like to thank everyone at FORCE for the support, guidance and advice I have received and continue to receive. Cancer is a cruel disease but FORCE and the people who work and volunteer there have created a peaceful oasis to help cancer patients and their families deal with treatment and its aftermath and to face the future in a more positive light.

I thought a lot about what I wanted to say and tried to put into words how I feel about FORCE and all the wonderful people who work and volunteer there. If what I have said gives encouragement to just one person to walk through the doors at FORCE and sign up for the Moving Forward programme or any of the other wonderful things on offer then I would be so happy. It's so easy to just hide away and try to deal with everything alone, which is what I tried to do but the wonderful people at FORCE have helped my husband and I more than words can say through the very dark days of my treatment and beyond. I hope that I can continue to be included in the FORCE family for the foreseeable future!

**Maggie Stephenson**