



HEALINGHOPE

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SURVIVOR

Val Ligon shares her story of gallbladder cancer and some important insights for other cancer patients.



★ Val Ligon ★

Successful ...

— CANCER —
SURVIVOR

Alexa's entire softball team had enjoyed a pool and slumber party at her home the night before, and had already made their way back to the pool for a Saturday morning swim. Her mom, Val, had just cleaned up after breakfast and was getting ready to spend the day with her family at River Forks Park to watch the Duck Race. While in the shower, Val experienced some stomach pain which lasted a few minutes. After showering, she made her way back to the kitchen when the pain returned. When Randy, her husband, entered the kitchen to check on her progress he noticed something was wrong. Val was hanging on to the counter top and in obvious pain. "Are you ok?" Randy asked in a concerned voice. "No," Val answered back. "What's wrong?" exclaimed Randy. "I don't know," Val pleaded back. Val was in excellent health and was training to run her first half-marathon, but now something appeared acutely wrong.

Randy instructed Alexa's older sister Emilee to watch after the younger girls while he rushed Val to urgent care. Val's pain was intense and unrelenting as the urgent care staff examined her. After ruling out a heart problem, she was sent to the emergency room for an ultrasound examination of her gallbladder and was told that they may decide to do emergency surgery to remove her gallbladder if their hunches were correct. However, after the ultrasound, she was instructed to see her primary care doctor on Monday. The couple sensed something serious was at play and once arriving

home called their neighbor who happened to be the head of the radiology department. Val explained to the radiologist what had happened to her and he reviewed her ultrasound images. Val and Randy's suspicion of something more serious was validated. A mass was detected in her gallbladder and an MRI was scheduled for Monday morning.

After the MRI was done, Val was scheduled to see Dr. Spence to discuss the findings. The findings from the MRI confirmed Val's gallbladder contained stones, the cause of her severe pain, as well as a large mass inside the gallbladder and damage to her bile duct. Two surgeries were scheduled. The first to place a stent to open the bile duct and a second to remove her gallbladder. After receiving the pathology report, Dr. Spence asked Val to bring Randy to his office to discuss the findings. "I just knew it was not good news," Val explained. As Dr. Spence confirmed their worst fears, all Val could think about was what she was going to tell her girls. She was not worried for herself. Dr. Spence told Val and Randy that he had consulted with Dr. Billingsley, a surgical oncologist, at Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU). No time was wasted, an appointment was made the next week to see Dr. Billingsley.

At OHSU, Dr. Billingsley explained "We have one chance to get this right" as he outlined what Val would need to do. Within two weeks, Val returned to OHSU and underwent a twelve-hour surgery that involved a liver resection and bile duct reconstruction. It just so happened Val's surgery took place on her birthday, which by chance was also her doctor's birthday.

It was hard with two kids in school for Val to leave town, but being self-employed offered flexibility in Randy's schedule to care for Emilee and Alexa while mom was recovering. Family members also helped out by watching after the girls and even took care of hosting Emilee's homecoming party so she would not miss out. "The entire experience made us all stronger," Val told us.

Val was released from OHSU ten days after her surgery and returned home to Roseburg where she met with Dr. Williams at the Community Cancer Center. "This part of my treatment plan called for

one pill each day for 12 weeks, as well as weekly chemotherapy infusions and injections one time per week, with the fourth week off," Val recounted.

After the first round of chemotherapy, Val returned to OHSU to finish up her treatment which consisted of daily radiation treatments (30 sessions) and chemotherapy. Val remembers when she finished loading her vehicle for the trip to Portland, a journey she would take alone, she noticed a passenger. Alexa had buckled a teddy bear into the passenger's seat to



keep her mom company while she was gone. Val was fortunate to find a condo in the John Ross Building that was within walking distance to the tram, which took her directly up to OHSU. It was a very nice place to

rest and recover with an awesome view of the river. The property owner was a cancer survivor who had taken a similar journey, and allowed Val to rent on a weekly basis allowing her to return home on the weekends to be with her family.

Six years later, Val remains cancer free. Emilee keeps very busy working as a caregiver and Alexa graduated from high school this past Spring. During treatment and recovery, Val was able to work, albeit part time. She now visits Dr. Williams on an annual basis and has returned to her normal life.

"Don't Google It!"

When asked what three things she would like to share with someone facing cancer, she replied, "Don't Google It! Dr. Spence suggested that I avoid reading online information about bladder cancer. He said, it will scare the hell out of you and you do not need any added stress. I would also say to surround yourself with positive people, especially when you are sick. And lastly, don't stress about little things that don't really matter."

Val works for the City of Roseburg Parks and Recreation Department. You might see her at Movies in the Park, and if you do she will be the one with a warm smile. Val is also planning to return to running once Alexa is settled in college.