

# HOW COPING WITH CANCER CHANGES YOUR LIFE

Story by Leslie O'Malley



Sherry Booles with her daughter and three “absolutely amazing” grandsons

Last April Sherry Booles was leading the normal, busy life of a wife, mother, grandmother and full-time employee.

This self-described “very hyper, very type A” personality was living in Little Rock with her husband, Harold, and working as an industry marketing manager for Acxiom. The family of their daughter, Laura, had grown to include three “absolutely amazing” grandsons—the oldest, now 6, and twin brothers born February 2011.

Booles was on a business trip in San Francisco when she made the discovery that would affect every part of her life: she found a lump on her left breast.

Booles had a clear mammogram the previous fall, but she had also been caring for an aunt who was diagnosed with cancer. “It just scared me,” she said.

As soon as she returned home, she saw a radiologist. Because the lump was round and smooth, her doctor thought it was just a cyst and told her she could come back in six months and have it drained.

But Booles wasn’t convinced. “I just had this nagging fear,” she said. “I wanted it (the cyst) removed.”

A week later, Booles had the cyst aspirated and requested a core tissue biopsy. The radiologist called her the next day and told her the lump was malignant.

Immediately Booles called Dr. James Hagans, who had treated her aunt. Dr. Hagans saw her April 18 and scheduled her surgery for April 22. During the two-week period between Booles finding the lump and her surgery, the lump had doubled in size and changed shape.

After Booles had a lumpectomy and eight lymph nodes removed, the pathology revealed triple negative breast cancer. Her oncologist, Dr. Mariann Harrington at Little Rock Hematology Oncology a division of CARTI, determined she would need both chemotherapy and radiation.

Starting in May, she received chemotherapy every three weeks for 18 weeks. In October she started her radiation therapy, which she finished Dec. 30.

Booles credits her ability to get through the long months of treatment to the unwavering support of her family, friends, coworkers and the “amazing” doctors, nurses and staff at CARTI.

Before Booles went through this experience, she had attended Festival of Trees, but she wasn’t extremely familiar with the work of CARTI. “It’s one of those things Arkansas needs to be proud of. They made me feel like I was the most important person there. I still take doughnuts to my therapists,” she said.

For someone who was used to being the caretaker, “it was hard to go to bed when I was sick,” she said. When she needed rest, her husband would take her to a cabin at Greers Ferry for the weekend.

Booles’ daughter became her “cheerleader.” She accompanied her mother to doctor’s appointments and every chemotherapy treatment so she could take notes for Booles to read later.

“I think one of the things when you’re diagnosed with cancer is you can only absorb so much information—you go into survival mode,” she said. “You can’t think about anything beyond that moment in time.”

Her employer allowed her to work from home while she was having chemotherapy, and her coworkers brought food to her house every week. “My boss said do

whatever you have to do to take care of you,” she said. At moments when Booles was scared or depressed, her “close network of girlfriends” would step in. “It was like God knew every time I needed to be cheered up. I’d get a card or a friend would visit,” she said.

When Booles began losing her hair from the chemotherapy, her family and friends were there to help her cope.

A native of Hamburg in southern Arkansas, Booles considers herself a Southern woman “and you know how we are about hair,” she said. “My hair was always fixed and hairsprayed.”

But after three days of the hair coming out in clumps, she decided to shave it. Her daughter and a friend brought over Skinnygirl® margaritas, cut her hair short, and then shaved her head. “They made it a fun thing instead of traumatic,” she said. “They made it a party.”

Her daughter and some friends also bought her wigs that looked like her hair. Booles wore them for three months—“until July, then we had the hottest summer ever.”

At that point she decided to go to work without a wig. “I had more compliments on my bald head than I ever had on my hair,” she said. She never wore the wigs to work again.

In addition to her regular wigs, Booles received a variety of “crazy” wigs, such as an Amy Winehouse-style

beehive and a wig of long black hair with pink stripes. These wigs came by mail without a card or explanation. Eventually, through a posting on her Caring Bridge site, Booles discovered a former boss was sending them to her.

“Halfway through chemo, he posted a comment about my rock ‘n’ roll wigs. I called him that day,” she said. “He sent them as a joke, never dreaming I would wear them, but I did.”

When Booles and her friends would meet for brunch, she would wear one of her crazy wigs, and her friends bought pink wigs. The group also donned rhinestone sunglasses and drank pink martinis.

“It was almost overwhelming to me how much trouble my friends would go through to give me an

hour of laughter and fun without thinking about cancer,” she said.

That laughter was important because the months of treatment were difficult. One of the hardest parts for Booles was not being able to help with her younger grandsons.

“They had to start getting immunizations, and I couldn’t change their diapers,” she said. “I didn’t feel like being around them, I couldn’t hold them. That is the part I really regret.”

But now that Booles is officially finished with her treatments, she is making up for lost time. Recently she was able to babysit for the twins, and she took her older grandson to visit Petit Jean State Park.

“It was such a good feeling to get out, walking around with him, hiking,” she said.

Booles will be 56 in October, and she considers herself a survivor.

“Every day it gets better,” she said. “I feel so good compared to where I was a few months ago.”

Although she feels about “90 percent back to normal,” she realizes the experience has changed her.

“I’m just a much more grateful person. I feel like getting up, getting dressed, going to work, going to the grocery store, doing laundry,” she said. “I know I appreciate the everyday things.”

“I would tell every woman if there’s something in your breast, have them (your doctors) get it out. Had I waited, I would have had a much less optimistic prognosis.”

Sherry Booles