

OUR SPECIAL SURVIVOR... MARIA ORTEGA!



On Valentine's Day 2009 at the age of 35 I found a lump in my left breast... I got up from the couch and went to the bathroom to have a look. I really could not see much but I could feel it, this was a Saturday, so I knew Monday I needed to make an appointment with my doctor. I went to the doctor that morning and had a mammogram and ultrasound done that afternoon by the time I was leaving the hospital from having those test done, my doctor's office called and told me to please go first thing the following morning to have a biopsy done and after 4 very long days, I went back to my doctor and he informed me that it was breast cancer. I was shocked when I received the news... My Oncologist explained everything in detail for me and said that I would need to see the breast surgeon so that we could go ahead and schedule the surgery so I did and the lumpectomy was scheduled within the next couple of days. After the surgery, I went back to get my stitches removed and they had the results of my tumor and how many lymph nodes were involved, and I felt if the lymph nodes were involved that it wasn't a good sign. They told me the cancer was a grade two and that the stage was IIB and that they removed 15 of my lymph nodes. After my lumpectomy, I waited 3 weeks before I started chemotherapy. My first few sessions of chemotherapy caused my hair to fall out, with quite a few more side effects which doesn't happen to everybody. I was in the shower one morning and as I was washing my hair it started coming out. I knew it was going to happen - I was expecting it - so I wasn't shocked. I called my boyfriend at work and told him, and he said, "Ok, we were expecting that. It's okay. I will come over and we will shave the rest off, don't worry". Once we did it I didn't really hide the fact that I was bald. Some people stared at me, but that was ok, it did not bother me. I had a 12 week course of chemotherapy, every Wednesday then I took a small break and started my long day sessions, I went for the next four months every third Wednesday for 8 hours, that is a long day! But right when I was just 1 session away from finishing chemotherapy, I had just found out that we received the results from the BRCA test and I was a BRCA 2, not the news you want to hear, so my doctors recommended me having a hysterectomy so I did on my 36th birthday, September 16, 2009 and soon after on September 28, 2009 I had a bilateral mastectomy ...After healing for about a month and half I started radiation 5 days a week for 6 weeks. I finished that on December 8, 2009. I did very well with my healing from radiation and I was just looking forward to my reconstruction surgery. On April 5, 2010, I was so ready for my breast reconstruction/DIEP flap surgery a 10 to 12 hour long procedure. There I was so excited and thinking with this surgery it would mark me finishing this long journey and I would start to get my life back day by day, but that was not the case... When I woke up from Surgery my family was there and Rick leaned over and said to me that I did well in the surgery but there were some complications with scar tissue due to the radiation done on my left side. My Plastic Surgeon came to see me and explained to me that there was so much scar tissue that the reconstruction in my left breast was not an easy one and to be prepared in case my body would reject the transplanted tissue. Well, my body did, it started to reject it and I developed Necrosis, this is when the tissue does not get any blood supply so it dies. My left breast could not be closed up, I had an incision 8 inches long and 5 inches wide completely open, going to the surgeon several times in 8 weeks to get dead tissue removed until the healthy tissue would show. My boyfriend and my mother had to clean it and pack it with Saline water three times a day. My breast was like this for 8 and half weeks. I

was bed ridden for those 8 weeks and no pain medication could make that pain go away, it was bad! I cried so much when my plastic surgeon said that it was looking healthier so he scheduled my surgery to close the incision. That surgery was on May 21, 2010. The process for healing from that surgery has been a slow one, I developed an infection about 2 weeks ago, so they have me on antibiotics to make sure it heals as it should. Since I had so many complications, I will need one more surgery and that should be in the next couple of months.

The key to my recovery has been and will always be the support I have received from my family and friends, the way they are encouraging me and telling me how well I look and how well I am coping. I thought, "Then it must be true, so I'll keep going". Everybody offers help, my co-workers have cooked meals and have taken me shopping, my family and friends have helped me from cleaning my home to helping with my kids and just some of the small stuff or just listen to me vent...it really gets me through. My mom will always be my angel; she shaved her hair completely off when I lost my hair! It was amazing!!! I love her so much! I have a wonderful man in my life that has been and will always be my ROCK!!! Not many men would stay with someone going through what I went through, but he has! I also have 2 wonderful kids that made me laugh when I just couldn't and helped me when I was too sick. My Daughter Bianca, she is 12 and my son Christian, he is 6; my family is why I got up everyday even when I could not.

When I was first diagnosed, I was scared, and it takes a lot of courage to get out of that feeling. I just look at myself and say, "I can live like this - scared and worried about my cancer - or get on top of it, try to fight it with everything I got and get through it being happy and as positive as I can be". It is really hard to do that, I do have some bad days but I will keep on fighting and get through it!

"I Will Survive"

