Cancer Health™

Community: My Life With Metastatic Breast Cancer

Deltra Kroemer, 35, lives in Waterbury, Connecticut, with her five children. She has Stage IV breast cancer.

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With just three words—You have cancer—I was suddenly transported to this island, separate from the land of the healthy and those who get to carry on living as if they'll be around forever. It was the summer of 2019, and I had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

I'd never felt so alone.

I quickly realized, however, that my family and closest friends were joining me here. Soon, I opened up and allowed myself to connect with the other members of Cancer Land and started to feel far less alone. These were my people now, the ones who understood what I was about to go through. As the saying goes, it's the worst club, but it has the best members.

A few weeks after receiving my cancer diagnosis, though, I learned that it was Stage IV. I had metastatic breast cancer (MBC) de novo, meaning it wasn't a recurrence. It just showed up on my doorstep or, rather, throughout my body, full-blown. Wrapping your mind around a diagnosis like mine isn't easy. It takes time, and, with five children, time isn't something I have a lot of.

My feelings of isolation grew.

Now, even on this island with others experiencing cancer, I felt like part of an outcast group. This is the experience of many of us living with MBC. It's easy to feel the disconnect even from other cancer patients who are early stagers and focused on getting to survivorship. I don't get to leave this cancer island. I'm stuck. I can make the best of life here, but I don't get to leave.

My family and friends gathered around me and sought to understand, my therapist helps me navigate my feelings, my children's therapist helps them navigate their own and the many virtual support groups I've interacted with have provided me advice that ranges from medical to personal to mental and emotional.

Deltra Kroemer and her five childrenCourtesy of Deltra Kroemer/Tina Pirozzoli

Still, I needed more. Those of us who live with MBC need our own spaces. We need to be able to share openly and without fear of making others uncomfortable. While some are focusing on getting done with treatment and what they'll do afterward, we are needing to discuss what our families will do after we're done with treatment—because when we're done with treatment, that usually means we are exiting this life.

I did find communities that truly reflect my situation as well. And when I did, a funny thing happened. I realized that I not only needed those communities for my own self but that I wanted to reach out and help others. Now, it's my time to start giving back, to hit the ground running with advocacy work. Since I know what community has done for me, I desire it for every other cancer patient, especially the young, the people of color and the late stagers like myself.

I got involved with For the Breast of Us, an organization that focuses on the needs of women of color affected by breast cancer. They are intentional about making space for those living with MBC.

A new project I am excited to be a part of, Project Life MBC, is creating that space we so desperately need. It's a virtual wellness house just for us, focusing on our unique physical, emotional, financial, social and spiritual needs. I'll be mentoring those needing a hand to hold as they navigate their own diagnosis. To me, it feels like building a cozy fire on this cancer island and inviting others to come connect and feel the warmth.

http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/community-life-metastatic-breast-cancer