

# Meet Susan

*"I'm really just an ordinary person who happens to have had cancer three times." Here's the story of a woman who believes that being grateful is what creates happiness.*

**SUSAN HELMRICH, AGE 55** • Health and Wellness Coach, San Francisco Bay Area

## **I was 21 and at the peak of my swimming career.**

I learned I had vaginal cancer caused by diethylstilbestrol (DES), which my mother took when she was pregnant with me. During a 10 ½ hour surgery, they removed my uterus and vagina, and constructed a new vagina from part of my colon. That was the first of my three cancers.

## **All I wanted to do was move on.**

I never embraced the cancer. I looked forward. I started swimming and exercising again. I applied to graduate school and got accepted. I am someone who focuses on the positive. I never allowed myself to feel sorry for myself. At every bad turn, I could have rolled up and rolled over and died. But I didn't. It's my nature to fight. Life goes on and it gets better after traumatic events.

## **Each cancer required radical surgery—you pay a huge price for that.**

The first surgery impacted my reproductive system, digestive system and urinary system. The surgery for my second cancer, which was a tumor in my bronchus, took out part of my left lung. My third cancer was a pancreatic tumor, and that surgery removed half of my pancreas, my gall bladder and my duodenum. My whole digestive tract had to be rewired. They removed so much during each surgery, there was nothing left to radiate. Plus there has been no known chemotherapy to target these cancers. So I've never had radiation or chemo. I think you're lucky if your life can be saved by surgery.

## **Because I swam, I was able to come back.**

I do think being fit has helped me survive these surgeries. I don't think we can completely prevent cancer, but I also think there is much we can do to impact our health. You have to stay on top of it—exercise, eat right, brush your teeth, etc.

## **I swim every day.**

At 5:45 a.m. my alarm goes off. Almost every day, I want to go back to sleep, but I don't. I get up and swim two to three miles a day. I also dance three times a week, work with a personal trainer two days a week, and walk most days. Water is the place I turn to when I feel badly. Dance class is my antidepressant. I'm a terrible dancer, but I have so much fun. We all have to find those places in life that will bring us joy.

## **I'm not Pollyanna.**

I get sad and mad. I don't like that I have to take Miralax® (laxative) every night, have to wear compression stockings, get bowel obstructions regularly and couldn't bear my own children. But I can't focus on that. If you focus on the negative, you live a negative life. If you focus on the positive, you live a positive life. We have choices. This is my reality. I had to accept it and make it my normal.

## **My family is a blessing.**

My husband has been an incredible partner. He is my best friend and advocate. I have two fabulous children. I know it sounds corny and trite, but every day is a gift.

## **Great truths I've learned.**

Embrace your adversity. Make it become your own. Figure out your life around it and don't use it as an excuse. Learn about it. Understand it. These are the cards I was dealt. I want to make the most of it. I am grateful. I am really grateful. Gratitude is the thing that is most highly correlated with happiness.

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