My family's story
by
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When I was 14 years old, my dad, who was 56, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. That was in June of 1969, and, despite two surgeries and rounds of chemo, he died two months later.

In November of 2010, my 41-year-old niece was diagnosed with breast cancer and decided to have a bilateral radical mastectomy along with the removal of her ovaries and fallopian tubes. When we heard about her breast cancer, we understood that the surgery was critical to her survival but no one could understand why she was having an additional surgery to have her ovaries and fallopian tubes removed.

When I flew to North Carolina to be with her for her chemotherapy, she informed me that she had inherited a deleterious gene known as BRCA1. She suggested that I have the BRCA1 test to see if I had it, I shrugged my shoulders in denial and proclaimed that I knew I didn't have the gene. Then she explained that my father, her grandfather, was most definitely positive and the blood test was the only definitive way to know. Her chemo and radiation went well and she has been cancer free for many years.

After testing positive for the BRCA1 gene in January of 2011, I waited until the end of June of that year to begin my surgeries. I was a teacher at the time and didn't want to take time off from school. My husband and I had tickets in hand for our summer vacation in Italy, but instinct told me to move on having the surgeries performed and postpone our trip for a later date. When the pathology report came back, it was apparent that cells were changing at the molecular level. I had four weeks to go before having full blown fallopian tube cancer, one of the more difficult cancers to diagnose.

We're living in a time when certain cancers can be linked with a genetic mutation. The BRCA1 gene is aligned with breast, pancreatic, prostate, uterine, cervical, colon and ovarian/fallopian tube cancers. BRCA2 is aligned with breast, pancreatic, ovarian/fallopian tube, gallbladder, bile duct and melanoma cancers.