



A co-survivor perspective

Written by Katie Toussaint | Photo by Pam Palmer

Rob Jenkins wears three bands on his wrist. One is bright white with family names in blue lettering. The second is off-white. The third... Rob will explain. Let's start with the second: he has worn it for seven years and it has faded from pink, but is still etched with the phrase "breast cancer awareness." "It doesn't matter where I go," he said, sipping an iced mocha. "I could be wearing a tuxedo and I wouldn't take it off."

Why he wears it

Susan G. Komen for the Cure considers a person to be a survivor the second she or he is diagnosed with breast cancer. Rob became a co-survivor when his wife Shelby was diagnosed nine years ago. "I consider a co-survivor to be anybody who is close to that survivor," he said. It can be a spouse, a best friend, a cousin—it doesn't matter. As for Rob, he is a former Marine and has been a warehouse manager at Northern Tool and Equipment Distribution Center in Fort Mill for about 10 years. He is a high-energy optimist and a father of four. He is a proud husband.

During the decade since Shelby's diagnosis, Rob has watched her become a devoted volunteer with Carolina Breast Friends, an organization that provides support to survivors in all stages of the breast cancer journey. Over the years, she rose to volunteer coordinator, to a mentorship role, to vice president, then president. Rob said, "That just shows her strength in knowing who she is and what she has gone through, that she can help somebody."

The diagnosis

When Shelby was diagnosed, she was 32—the same age as her mother when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had performed a self-check in the shower. She told Rob she felt a lump. "My initial thought was, well, let's get it checked," he said. "I wasn't sure what to think because there are a lot of false calls."

Then, when Shelby's cancer was confirmed on

April 4, 2005, Rob said to her: "Let's do whatever you have to do to get this taken care of."

Co-survivor strategy

Shelby went through a lumpectomy, six rounds of chemo and radiation before she was declared cancer-free. Throughout, Rob kept working, cooking meals and helping out with the kids. "Life doesn't stop as much as you think you might want it to in a moment," he said. "It doesn't stop."

Aside from accompanying Shelby on doctors' visits, he followed a single support strategy: "I gave her her space. Situations like that, I just let her know I'm here ... You just have to pay attention to know when to step back and when to pry."

He did step in with medical care, administering shots to her stomach after chemo to keep her white blood cell count up. The trick was to not hesitate. He had no experience giving shots, but the doctor asked Rob if he could do it. Rob recalled: "I said, 'yes.' And I did it."

Stepping up the co-survivorship

After five years, with checkups every six months, Shelby considered the possibility of a double mastectomy because of her genetic predisposition to breast cancer. Rob watched on as Shelby, a researcher by nature, tracked down female perspectives. She found Carolina Breast Friends online in her quest to get feedback about mastectomies.

Rob went with Shelby to the first group meeting she attended. He remembered how the women who have had mastectomies welcomed her. "They grabbed her," he said, "took her in the back, showed theirs, showed her what it would look like. And she was right at home."

His role, then, was to stay in the main meeting room, "being there if needed." Then the doctor appointments continued as Shelby prepared for, went through and recovered from her mastectomy. During medical visits, Rob stayed alert to counter any grogginess Shelby was experiencing during recovery. "So I was

there to listen intently and make sure that I heard what she may not have heard," he said.

He became a more hands-on caretaker as well. He helped her sit up, move around the house and empty her drainage tubes. And Shelby recovered. Today, she thrives. She works as an Executive Assistant at Duke Energy Corporation and remains deeply involved with Carolina Breast Friends.

Expanding support

During his co-survivorship journey, Rob did not look for his own source of support. "I don't think I needed one," he said. "I'm fairly laid back. I'm very optimistic. So I don't think I needed one. It did help to know other survivors, and being a part of Carolina Breast Friends—that helped as well."

His own volunteerism with Carolina Breast Friends grew as Shelby got more involved with the organization. He found that a co-survivor has the power to help others, too. Rob said, "I led a couple of the men's groups where the husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, whoever, can come in. At one of them we had an oncologist, a psychiatrist, a plastic surgeon, all guys, to come and talk to the guys—because guys don't show their feelings very easily. But if you are talking to another guy who has gone through the same thing, in a group setting, it makes it a lot easier. I didn't see any sadness because Carolina Breast Friends is about being happy and going forward."

He likes to laugh, joke, put others at ease. The key for anyone on the survivorship journey is being patient, he said. "It doesn't fix overnight, or in a year. Once you're a survivor you're always a survivor. Or a co-survivor."

Back to the bands

Rob wears three bands on his wrist. One is bright white. The second is off-white. And the third is tie-dyed hot pink and white. It matches his advice to any other co-survivor out there: "Listen and be patient. It takes time. It takes work. And be positive. Attitude is everything."

Printed on the last band are those very words: Attitude is everything. ■