

Jackie Kirkpatrick: Ovarian Cancer Survivor

Jackie Kirkpatrick was diagnosed with stage I ovarian cancer on February 9, 2000, at age 49. Today, she's 60, and thriving. Jackie shared her story with the National LGBT Cancer Network because she believes that "part of my responsibility as a survivor is to spread awareness."

LGBTCN: You were fortunate in that your cancer was diagnosed very early, at stage I. How did that happen?

Jackie: My story really reflects how important it is to listen to your intuition. I had gone back to school to get my bachelor's degree. I was sitting in a classroom one day, and a voice inside of me said, You have something you need to do. I listened to that voice, and within a few weeks I applied for insurance. Kaiser accepted me and gave me a policy. I have to thank Kaiser for saving my life.

LGBTCN: What happened after you obtained health insurance?

Jackie: I made an appointment to see a primary care doctor. I hadn't had insurance for a long time, and I couldn't tell you how long it had been since I had had a pelvic exam. I told the doctor that. I also told her that my right foot has been swollen forever. She ordered a CT scan from the waist down because of my foot, and during that CT scan they saw that I had an enlarged ovary.

LGBTCN: What happened next?

Jackie: I had a pelvic exam, which confirmed that my ovary was enlarged. The doctor told me that she wanted me to have an ultrasound, and that's when I started to worry. The ultrasound saw a tumor on my ovary, and I can still remember the day my doctor called to tell me. She told me that it looked like a dermoid tumor, and that these are usually benign. She told me that they see these all the time, and I thought well, the doctor doesn't seem worried.

I went online to get information and I saw pictures and these are not pretty things. It was ugly, and I wanted it taken care of. So I met with a gynecologist, who gave me three options: a total hysterectomy; come back in six months and observe if it's changed; or do nothing. I said, "I don't want this in my body. I want to have a hysterectomy."

LGBTCN: Was it bothering you? Did you have symptoms?

Jackie: I had no symptoms at all. No pain. No bloating. And that's why I want to stress the importance of following your intuition. Something said I needed to do something, and this is what happened.

LGBTCN: When did you learn it was cancer?

Jackie: It was during the surgery that they found out it was cancer. I went into surgery thinking it was a benign tumor. When I came out of surgery and woke up in the hospital room my mom was there and I looked at window and realized it was very late at night. I had been told that my surgery would only be an hour or two, so I realized something was not right. I looked at my Mom, and said, "Am I okay?" And she said, "No, you have cancer."

LGBTCN: What was your response?

Jackie: It wasn't in my realm of reality of what I thought would happen. The surgeons came in and said, "We don't meet women like you very often." They told me that with most of the women they see, the cancer has spread. And most of these women die. When I heard that, I knew that I could not feel sorry for myself. I knew how fortunate I was.

LGBTCN: Did you have chemotherapy?

Jackie: The surgeon told me I needed to see an oncologist, who would talk to me about chemo. The first oncologist I saw I did not like at all. No bedside manner. He made me feel like I was stupid for asking questions about why I needed chemo. So, I got a second opinion. The second oncologist I saw was totally opposite from him. She told me I was welcome to bring a tape recorder. She told me I could ask her questions about anything. She drew pictures for me and explained about chemo and why she wanted me to have it.

I was absolutely terrified of chemo and what it would do to me because of how toxic it is. She told me that I would lose my hair. She told me what was going to happen. My beautiful blonde hair fell out. But other than that, I breezed through it. I hardly had any problems.

LGBTCN: Did being a lesbian affect your care?

Jackie: No, it didn't. But after I was diagnosed I learned a lot about ovarian cancer, and I know that lesbians may be more at risk of ovarian cancer because many have not had children, which is a risk factor.

LGBTCN: Were you able to go back to school?

Jackie: Yes! I finished my bachelor's degree in sociology at Cal State San Marcos. My chemo was over by the summer session, so I went back to school then. My mother was worried that I was doing too much too soon, but I told her that if I didn't go back I might never go back. One of my professors was recovering from breast cancer. We both didn't have hair. She had a wig and I had a hat.

LGBTCN: What do you want people to know about ovarian cancer?

Jackie: I am a survivor. Part of my responsibility is to spread the word about ovarian cancer because most women who are diagnosed with ovarian cancer die. I believe that one reason God spared my life was so that I could let other women know about how important it is to be aware of their bodies. God is through my whole story. I still say cancer is the best thing that ever happened to me. But I'm alive to tell you that. That's the good part.