Riding With Reindeer

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I live a great life with cancer. I know I'm not alone. But unlike some of you, I have a secret weapon that has kept me well even though I was diagnosed nine years ago with Stage IV (metastatic) inflammatory breast cancer.

Inflammatory breast cancer has the worst prognosis of all forms of breast cancer, with only an 11% to 20% five-year survival.

Yet I have never been hospitalized. I work, travel and have lots of adventures and fun. It's not the kind of story you expect. But it could be your story too.

My secret weapon is an extra layer of support called palliative care. I still go to my oncologist for care and treatment. But I also have a palliative care team—including a nurse practitioner, physician, social worker and chaplain—that focuses on me and my family, managing my pain and symptoms, and helping me live my best life. Research shows that people who add palliative care to their usual care feel better—and live longer.

Did I tell you that I went to the Arctic Circle to go reindeer and dog sledding last January? The reindeer were super friendly (just watch out for the antlers as they turn their heads). The slow, peaceful sledding lets you sit back and enjoy the idyllic winter wonderland. Dogsledding was the polar opposite: The huskies were ready to run. They howled with delight as they were harnessed. The snow was so deep it often covered their legs, but that made them all the more energetic and joyful.

I could never have gone on my many adventures were it not for palliative care. It helps you get through the challenges of treatment and the discomforts of the disease. It's for people of any age, whether they have curable or chronic cancer or are facing the end of life.

My palliative care team has helped me anticipate and avoid many puddles. For example, around five years ago, the cancer spread to a new area in my spine. It hurt. Standard treatment for bone metastasis pain is 10 to 20 doses of radiation. But my palliative care doctor told me that new research had found that one slightly larger dose was just as effective—without any nausea, burning, redness or loss of appetite.

It worked like a charm, turning off the pain immediately with no side effects. I was on a train to Washington, DC, the next day feeling like myself again. Plus, I had pain meds in case of a temporary flare-up and a laxative, since the meds could have caused constipation so severe it could have landed me in the ER. I never needed the medication, but the point is I had a plan.

That’s what palliative care does for me. I look forward to more work, more play and a great life ahead. I wish the same for you and your loved ones.

To learn more and to find a team near you, check out the Center to Advance Palliative Care: www.getpalliativecare.org.

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