Brain Cancer Survivor Marie Fricker Shares Wisdom and Humor

In a combination memoir and resource guide, Fricker devotes chapters to each stage of treatment and recovery.

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In her new book All In My Head: How a Hypochondriac Beat Brain Cancer, Marie Fricker wrote about her experience of being diagnosed with, treated for, and surviving—for 10 years and counting—a rare type of brain lymphoma.

The following interview from Dana-Farber Cancer Institute's blog gives just a taste of her journey.

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On what was supposed to be a memorable night for all the right reasons, things suddenly went terribly wrong for Marie Fricker. Arriving at Brigham and Women's Hospital for the birth of her first grandchild, she began experiencing dueling discomforts that rooted her to a bench in the front lobby: a sensation of searing heat in her left foot, and a chilly, pins-and-needles feeling throughout the rest of her left side.

Fricker made it up to her daughter's room for baby Benjamin's delivery, but the pain didn't go away. Fricker soon learned she had a very rare brain cancer known as primary central nervous system lymphoma (PCNSL) and began 13 months of treatment at Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center. Although she could find scant mention of her disease in cancer self-help books, as a professional writer, Fricker was intrigued by one piece of advice all of the books shared: Keep a journal.

And so, she wrote—in notebooks, scraps of paper, even on napkins. When she ran out of things to write on, or her thoughts moved faster than she could guide her pen, she dictated to a recorder. As predicted in the cancer self-help books, recording her musings helped Fricker through treatment, and now they are doing the same for others with the publication of her first book: All in My Head: How a Hypochondriac Beat Brain Cancer.

"During my treatment, I was driven by a recurring need to try and help people who were feeling as scared as I was," says Fricker, 64. "That's what kept me writing, along with the fact I could find no books by PCNSL survivors. I felt I could fill a niche, and the feedback I'm getting from people has been tremendously rewarding."

In a combination memoir and resource guide, Fricker devotes chapters to each stage of treatment and recovery, provides a list of resources for coping with PCNSL and cancer in general, and "Marie's Top 15 List" of what she learned from cancer. Like much of the text, the list is filled with equal parts wisdom and humor.

Fricker doesn't hold back the challenging details of her cancer journey. When a family member suggests that she embodied the popular "Stand up to Cancer" credo, she disagrees, writing "Cancer had taken me to my knees, and I literally crawled my way back from it."

The book does have a happy ending: Under the care of Andrew Norden, MD, MPH, and other caregivers, Fricker recovered and has been stable for nearly a decade. She has returned to work part-time, watched her grandson Ben take his first steps and start school, and has become an advocate for Dana-Farber—at a seminar last spring, she gave out free books to 60 Dana-Farber brain cancer patients.

Norden praises All in My Head as a valuable resource for PCNSL patients, and believes it can inspire other families dealing with any cancer to stay positive.

"Marie's gift is the use of humor and colorful anecdotes to discuss her difficult and often terrifying journey," Norden writes in the book's foreword. "Every patient's quality of life can be improved by listening carefully to her message of perseverance and hope."

This article was originally published in Dana-Farber Cancer Institute's Insights blog. Learn more about treatment for brain tumors at the Center for Neuro-Oncology at Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center. Click here to learn more about brain cancer at Cancer Health.

Visit http://www.mariefricker.com/ to order All in My Head: How a Hypochondriac Beat Cancer.

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