

Vanessa Salazar De Ingardia  
Ironteam Honoree

Type Of Illness: Lymphoma (Hodgkin's)  
Diagnosed: June 1995  
Diagnosis Update: Officially cured



If there is one thing I can say about my little journey since 1995, it is that there has never been a dull moment!

In early summer of 1995 when I was 23, after months of ignoring chest pains, headaches, dizziness, and increasing fatigue, I finally went to see a doctor to try to figure out why I couldn't make it through the day without a 3-hour nap. The doctors found a very large tumor growing around my heart: it was 10 X 13 X 2.5 centimeters by the time it was discovered. I was lucky enough to be included in an experimental program at Stanford Hospital. The oncologists at Stanford told me at the time that the enormous amount of chemotherapy and radiation needed to fight such a large tumor would potentially cause heart, lung, liver, and/or kidney damage that may not present itself for years, but that if I did not follow the recommended program of 6 months of heavy-duty chemotherapy and 3 months of radiation I would be dead within a matter of weeks. Thus began almost a year of persistent nausea & dry-heaving, complete hair loss, self-injections twice daily, a 20-lb weight loss, and radiation burns. When I was finally done with my treatments I was thrilled to walk my scrappy bag of bones and shiny bald head around town, because I had beaten my lymphoma. I was alive!

A few years later, in July of 1999, I noticed familiar chest pain and dizziness creeping up on me again. As strange as it may sound I was relieved when the doctors told me that I was only suffering through major heart damage and was not having a lymphoma relapse. Evidently the radiation from a few years back had cauterized parts of my heart shut, and that no blood was getting into my heart from my head and my arms. I was immediately flown to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for open-heart surgery. The first surgery failed, and 8 hours after stapling my ribcage back together, I was sawed open again for the second open-heart surgery. I was finally able to fly back to California after a nice lengthy stay at Mayo Clinic.

It was about this time that I heard about Team In Training, and I signed up to run my first marathon. I will never forget the Friday before what was supposed to be our first group training run. My world turned black as I listened to what my doctor told me after my routine heart test: Vascular Failure. I was immediately flown back to the Mayo Clinic for a third open-heart surgery that involved the removal of leg veins to be sewn into my heart. Once again, after having my ribcage and skin stapled and sewn back together yet again, I was finally able to go back to California.

Through all of this I still had this nagging itch to run a marathon. I had never run a distance greater than 4 miles previous to any of this, and my desire to complete a marathon had only become deeper. After several months of fund-raising and learning to first walk then run on my vein-depleted legs, I completed my first marathon with TNT less than a year after my last heart surgery, in March of 2001. I was hooked; I completed my second full marathon in January 2002 and have run numerous half marathons with the Team since then.

People like you are the ones that have made all of this even possible. Remember how I told you that I was part of an experimental program at Stanford? Well the truth of the matter is that I was part of a clinical trial that was 100% funded by the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society of Northern California. If it weren't for people like you, there wouldn't be people like me lucky enough to be here to share my story with you.

I just finished the full SF Marathon (July 2006) and the Nike Half Marathon in October 2006 (my latest event with the South Bay Run Team). Together we are making a brighter tomorrow for so many people who have been challenged with this disease. I am so proud to be part of your team.

PS Have I told you how much TNT has benefited ALL areas of my life? I met my husband Mike Ingardia, TNT Winter Tri coach, through TNT. Talk about fringe benefits.....= )

- Vanessa

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