

# Annabel's Story

**A**nnabel is a 58 year old mother of one daughter and two sons. At age 41 she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and twelve years later she received her second diagnosis. This time it was ovarian cancer. After genetic counselling she decided to be tested to find out if her cancer was hereditary. She wasn't surprised when she tested positive for a BRCA1 gene mutation. In this interview with Gene Scene (GS) Annabel talks about the impact her cancer and the genetic test have had on her life for the past 15 years.

**GS:** Tell me about your breast cancer diagnosis.

**Annabel:** I found a lump when I was showering one day. It was during a very, very busy time of my life. The only one I mentioned it to was my husband. We didn't even think about cancer. There was no one in my family who had breast cancer. But I knew that this lump didn't feel right. So when I finally—I think it was about two months later— had a chance, I went to the doctor.

He said I had to go into the hospital immediately and have the lump removed. I wanted to put it off. He must have been very concerned because about 11 o'clock that night he called me and insisted on seeing me in his office on Monday.

So on Monday, after dropping off my daughter at the airport, I drove to the doctor's office. I'm not sure how I got there. I couldn't even tell you if I went through any red lights. When I arrived my husband was waiting for me. My doctor went through every little detail about what we were to anticipate. He explained everything about what my options were—a mastectomy or a lumpectomy.

In the end I just had a lumpectomy with thirty six treatments of radiation.

**GS:** What kind of support did you have during that time?

**Annabel:** None. I felt very alone. I didn't know who I could talk to because there wasn't much said about breast cancer. My biggest support was from my aunt who used to drive the ambulance from the University Hospital to the Cross [Cancer Institute] with patients for treatment. She used to stop by and come and see me. And she would say to the staff, "Remember, this is my niece so you make sure you look after her." And I felt really good that she would come. No one ever told me to go to a support meeting or that there was somebody I could talk to. Nothing. I managed on my own. I was my own support.

**GS:** Ovarian cancer is sometimes called the "disease that whispers" because it is difficult to detect in the early stages. How did you discover that you had ovarian cancer?

**Annabel:** I wasn't feeling great. I thought I had the flu so I went to my doctor. I remember telling a friend, if I didn't know any better, I'd think I was pregnant. Sometimes I'd feel kind of nauseous. A friend commented on how often I was going to the bathroom. We even joked about it. When I think back, my pants were all tight on me around the waist but I also thought I'd just put on a little weight. And I did have a pain right in my side when I leaned forward. It felt like I was leaning on something. But I never gave it any thought.

The next Monday I was in the hospital for surgery. They took out a tumor that was approximately 6" X 10" plus they took out both of my ovaries.

**GS:** What happened after surgery?

**Annabel:** I went for chemo every two weeks at first. The treatment lasted about five months. There were a lot of side effects. I got numbness in my feet. I got very sick. It was very draining. This was my second time around with cancer and I had so much support in my own circle of friends and family. There was always someone coming around or calling.

**GS:** And did you talk about your cancer with your friends and family?

**Annabel:** Very much so. I think I educated people. Because nobody seemed to know too much about it. I've had ovarian cancer and breast cancer. I hope that people understand that there's hope. Just because you have cancer doesn't mean you're dying.

**GS:** Tell me about the painting project you did after your ovarian cancer diagnosis.

**Annabel:** A few days after my treatment I usually felt good. So one day I decided to paint my bedroom. I painted this one wall navy blue and I had to give it about five coats of paint. My mother would have absolutely flipped if she had known what was doing because I was supposed to be sick because I had cancer and I wasn't supposed to be doing anything. But I would paint and every day I would give it a new coat and then I decided to stripe it and coat it with varathane. It took a lot of time. I thought.....If I die, I'll still be there because that's my paint job. I've made my mark.

**GS:** How did you get referred to the Genetics Clinic?

**Annabel:** It was through my family doctor. Since I had had both cancers she thought it would be advisable for me to be tested.

**GS:** Was it hard for you to decide to have genetic testing?

**Annabel:** Yes and no – because I didn't know too much about it. I wondered...genetic testing for what? What are they going to find out? I went back to my family doctor and she explained to me that if I was tested and they would find a mutation, family members could also find out if they had inherited the gene [mutation].. And I thought, what have I got to lose? I've already had the cancer. I can help some of my family members.

**GS:** Are you glad you had genetic testing?

**Annabel:** Yes, I'm glad, for my daughter's sake. She has gone for testing and she's positive. Now she knows that she has to be especially vigilant about her health.

**GS:** What has been the hardest thing for you through all of this?

**Annabel:** In the back of my mind, I keep thinking I'm going to get cancer again. And when the Cross no longer wants to see me, who's going to look out for me? I don't think there were any real worries when I had cancer because somebody was looking after me. It's when they don't want to see me anymore and I get cancer someplace else and we don't find it early enough. That I think of so much.

**GS:** How do you keep your positive attitude?

**Annabel:** I think I'm an optimist by nature. I've got projects to finish off. That's what keeps me going. Until I'm at a point where they say there is no help for me, I think my positive attitude has to take over to do some of the healing, to get the most out of the life that I have. I hope that in the years I have left I can accomplish everything that I've wanted to do.

**GS:** Has it helped you to belong to the HBOC Society?

**Annabel:** Oh definitely. All through those cancers, I always felt so alone. And now I've got people who have the same thing in common and we can talk and laugh about things. And that's what it's all about. Just hearing that someone else has a story. You can't do anything for me and I can't do anything for you. But I can hear your story. That's what makes it so worthwhile.