

Reflections of a Survivor

“You have breast cancer.”

It’s a diagnosis that women dread hearing and is all too common, although it was slightly different with me because I was a 38 year old man. Back in late 2008, I started to notice an occasional wet spot on my shirts. For a few weeks, I didn’t think anything about it. Then I noticed that it was always the same spot. My right nipple was leaking a clear serum-like fluid. My doctor looked at it and recommended further testing. And here’s where the indignity kicked in. Believe me when I say that there is nothing more emasculating than being a five foot ten, 240 pound man with a shaved head and tattoos who has to sit in a pastel, pink ribbon-decorated waiting room -- awaiting a mammogram. So, after a ton of tests – I was told I had breast cancer.

Within a week I had a double mastectomy that left me with some ugly scars, but that doesn’t matter so much to me because, unlike a woman, my breasts aren’t part of my sexual identity. In fact, I still joke that I’ll get free beer in bars for the rest of my life by betting other guys that I don’t have any nipples. The mastectomy got all of the cancer and had removed all potentially cancerous tissue – which means that I didn’t have to have chemotherapy. However, I do have a couple year course of Tamoxifen.

It’s been almost a year since my diagnosis and, since this all started, I’ve felt obligated to spread the word that male breast cancer is a real thing. I’ve been working with Komen NEO to advocate male education. I was lucky. I listened to my body and didn’t ignore what it was saying. I went to my doctor early enough to catch it before cancer had spread into my chest or my lymph nodes. I fought my guy-like instinct to ignore the problem. If you’re reading this, and if you have a man in your life, tell him my story and encourage him to not be a dude. Tell him to go to the doctor at the first sign of anything weird and not be being a tough guy. If I’d ignored my body and something as seemingly insignificant as some painless leaking from my nipple, for even a few months, my story could have been completely different.

Dale Crowley, Survivor and Activist