

# An Early Breast Cancer Diagnosis

The following article features in Issue One of the ST BREAST magazine.



**Heather Plaister clearly remembers the moment she found a breast lump. A woman of great faith, she had said a morning prayer before asking God if there was someone she should be praying for. "Then it was just like a thought process went through my head - 'you have not done a breast check for a while'." Heather was only 48 at the time but did a check and found a lump. Tests revealed she had a stage 3 aggressive breast cancer that had spread to her lymph nodes. She and her husband David were devastated, and worried about how to break the news to their teenage daughter, Elenarose. Since her diagnosis in 2017, Heather has endured surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, targeted therapy and a further year of therapy to try and reduce her risk of recurrence. Now, she says she has done all she can and "faith, family and medicine" help her to remain positive.**

"Our daughter Elenarose was just about to go into Year 9 when I was diagnosed with an aggressive, advanced breast cancer. She was almost 14 and we all know that can be an incredibly difficult time for teenage girls.

Only weeks earlier we had given her a letter from us both as part of her birthday present, telling her all the things we would like her to achieve and talking about what makes her special. She read it and said, 'Is one of you dying?' And we said, 'No, it's a big year for you and we wanted you to know all of this'.

And then of course two weeks later we were sitting her down and telling her I was not well.

From the start, we decided to be very honest with her. Elenarose is a mature girl anyway and a great communicator.

We discussed what the approach was moving forward, and we talked about faith.

Through all of it, she has been incredibly calm. That doesn't mean she hasn't cried, because she has. But she has been positive and very aware. So, we would tell her everything that was going on, and I think that helped.

Her school was amazing. I went and spoke to them and they provided phenomenal support right from the start. They made sure all her relevant teachers knew and they spoke with all her close friends. Our wider family was also very caring, regularly checking in. My Mum also travelled from the country every few weeks to be there for us.

I did find the treatment very hard, particularly the 24 weeks of chemotherapy. I was always the person who got the very worst side effects that only 2-5% of women get. I was having double doses every three weeks and the first time, I was sick for a week. The second dose, it had extended to two weeks. By the third dose, I was very unwell. I ended up with nasty anal fissures and various gastro issues which were exceedingly painful. Sometimes I would just sob into David's arms, but I am so grateful that although my body began to break down from the treatments, my heart and mind stayed strong.

Then, when you are thrown into early menopause with the hormone therapies, it is hard. I was having terrible hot flushes, waking every night.

We have since talked to Elenarose about how she managed, through those first few months in particular. She told us, 'I made a choice in that first week - I thought, 'I can get really angry and react badly, or I can have faith'. She chose faith and the 'cup half full' approach and seeing how she has handled everything makes me so proud.

As a family we have thrown everything we can at this cancer. I have done everything I can to fight it.

And Elenarose said the other day, 'You know what? One good thing came out of

all of this - because of your hot flushes, we got ceiling fans!

**Heather Plaister**