



Libby at the annual CARP Conference in October 2008

LIBBY ZNAIMER'S Zoomer Report

A HAPPY BIRTHDAY ...
AND THE GIFT OF MAKING WISHES

beautiful flowers and copious amounts of candy. They've remembered me in their prayers, too. I've had prayers for my health in synagogues, candles lit for me in churches, and one friend's mother involved her entire Sikh temple in Winnipeg! I believe in the power of these prayers, even though I'm not much of a believer. Thankful as I am, I'm looking forward to a time when I won't always be on the receiving end of this, when I can pay some of it back.

But there's not much of a peer group for those of us with this cancer. The overall survival rate is only about five per cent — triple that for those who successfully get through the surgery. One of the most heartening messages I received was from a woman named Francilla. "I am a 10-year survivor," she wrote in an e-mail, "and I just want to let you know there are some of us out there."

I have faith there's every chance I will join her club. In the first place, it was practically a miracle that chemotherapy shrank my tumour enough to make me a candidate for surgery. Then I got lucky again. "Your pathology results are as good as they could be," Dr. Gallinger told me when the lab work came back. It turns out my cancer was the least aggressive kind, and there was no detectable spread to the surrounding tissue or my lymph nodes. According to some numbers, patients with results like this may have up to a 40 per cent survival rate. I'll have more treatment in case there are microscopic cancer cells that didn't show up on the tests. That will increase my odds by another 10 per cent or so. But it's not just a numbers game. It comes down to my own individual case. I figure if I can get this disease despite low single-digit risk factors, I can beat it the same way.

My doctors are more circumspect. "Either you're cured or you're not," Dr. Gallinger told me. It means only time will tell. If I go five years without a recurrence, I will probably be safe.

So, in the meantime, I'll try to enjoy each day as much as I can — and take the advice that's inscribed on a gift from my brother Moses, the founder of this magazine. It's a handsome silver bracelet, and he wears one exactly like it in solidarity. The engraving looks like the squiggles on a medical monitor. But if you look closely, you can read the legend: F**k Cancer! **Z**

I recently celebrated my best birthday ever. It was five weeks to the day after a gruelling six-and-a-half-hour operation that was my only hope of being cured of pancreatic cancer. My surgeon, Dr. Steven Gallinger of Toronto's University Health Network, removed part of my pancreas, part of my stomach, bile duct, small bowel and the surrounding lymph nodes. Then he joined the remaining parts to the intestine, effectively hooking me up to a new plumbing system. Most important, he also removed the cancerous tumour. Just three-and-a-half months earlier, I'd been told that my cancer was inoperable, and this would likely be my last birthday.

The Whipple Procedure is complex surgery with many possible complications. Studies show the outcome depends on the experience the hospital and surgeon have. According to American standards, an institution should perform at least 10 a year to stay current. Dr. Gallinger is considered one of the best — he does about 20 annually, of the 50 to 75 performed at UHN.

"I think everyone knows what I'm wishing for," I said as I blew out the candles on my cake. At that moment, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. It was amazing to feel well enough to celebrate with my closest family and friends, the people who haven't left my side since this ordeal began. And to realize there are enough of them to fill our home! They've been visiting and calling, cooking and buying groceries day in and day out.

I also have a wider circle of well-wishers — the people who've taken time to send encouraging e-mails,

Libby Znaimer is a veteran Canadian journalist. She hosts The Zoomer Report on television and on radio at Classical 96.3 FM and AM740, where she also serves as VP of News. Her book In Cancerland: Living Well is the Best Revenge (Key Porter) has just come out in paperback.