

J: Will you tell us a little bit about how you first heard about Smith Center?

M: Sure, I actually first came to the Smith Center a little over a year ago. I was in the middle of a year of treatment and kind of in a weird moment in that treatment where while I had been treating up in New York and commuting back and forth, my family lives in New York, for the second half of treatment I was just here, in DC. Taking chemo pills, by myself and without my immediate family around me and that felt very isolated all of a sudden. Which was a new experience for me. And also going back to work full time and trying to juggle all that.

So I was kind of feeling a lot of anxiety through the experience so just decided that I needed some additional support. Which was interesting for me because I've been at this cancer thing for almost 30 years now. And that was the first moment where I really did feel vulnerable and kind of in need an additional community.

So I really just Googled and was trying to understand what was out there in DC. Smith Center was the first thing that came up and it was really funny for me to realize because it's located at exactly the mid-point between my apartment and my office.

I don't exactly walk by every day but I walk within half a block and the fact that I just didn't even realize but also it was also so clear to me that it was convenient on so many levels so it was a great fit.

I was actually really frustrated when I first looked it up because I think I had just missed a support group so it was like you have to wait two weeks or maybe it was during the summer so it was a whole month or something. And I was like oh my God but I need it!

So anyways, I knew that as soon as programming started rolling around again I was right here and started doing support groups and yoga and all that kind of stuff. And you haven't been able to get rid of me since.

J: We don't want to. So you mentioned briefly your cancer history and of course I know about that but will you tell us a bit about that so that other people can learn more about you.

M: So I am a four-time cancer survivor I was first diagnosed when I was 6 months old with a form of cancer in the retinas of both my eyes. And received radiation for that as an infant. And then when I was 12-years-old I developed a bone tumor in my right sinus which was essentially a late effect of the radiation I had as a baby. As it turns out I have a genetic mutation that also means that I am hypersensitive to radiation and more likely to develop secondary cancers at a radiation site. And I had surgery and a year of chemo and then I was out of treatment for about two years until I was 15 and was diagnosed with another bone tumor, this time in my heart. So that was essentially a metastasis of the original bone tumor in my sinus.

So I had open heart surgery for that followed by another year of chemo to prevent a similar metastasis from happening which it did, luckily, so that ended that battle. And then I was

cancer-free and out of treatment for almost 12 years. When I was diagnosed about a year ago with stage two breast cancer and underwent a year of chemo and surgery for that. The breast cancer is a diagnosis that doesn't make as much sense as the others. The first three, they're unfortunate events but there's kind of a story arc, they connect to one another. The breast cancer doesn't. I'm very young, I was diagnosed at 27, I don't have a significant family history of breast cancer, I don't personally have either of the breast cancer mutations. It doesn't seem like it's something that's linked to the other mutation that I do have.

So that was kind of part of something that I was dealing with this past year. So I finished treatment for the breast cancer back in December so I guess I'm now a little more than 10 months out of treatment.

J: So what was it like for you the first time you came to Smith Center?

It was actually really interesting. The first program I came to was the kind of general cancer support group. I know I was like a basket case when I showed up, I was like not my normal self. I had so many stressors going on and was dealing with the challenges of being back at work and still being in treatment but not have as clear signals to the rest of the world that I was in treatment. Because I didn't have to go to a hospital and get hooked up to an IV every week or leave the office at whatever time to catch my Amtrack back to New York for treatment. And my hair was growing back, I didn't lose my hair with the second chemo I had last year.

All of that without the support system I was used to with my family being there, like geographically close, throughout treatment. So I first showed up at support group, it was just a really interesting experience. I remember leaving that hour and half long discussion and just being like "I've been doing this cancer thing personally for almost 30 years, and I don't understand any of it." And it was so clear to me. And in that moment I was stressed about work and whatever but I came in with a certain set of issues that were very in the forefront of my mind and sitting in that conversation I realized that the things I was focusing on weren't what was really important.

And so I think the conversation and just hearing other people's stories and how they were processing what they were going through and the things they were thinking about at whatever stage in their treatment or whatever the prognosis was you know it was very heavy conversation but like in a great way.

I was like, yeah Mary you're a fool. You're concerned about like you had a tough day at work today, like chillax you're fine. You're still alive.

So I just knew from that conversation. I think what I loved about was that the first one was just seeing, my introduction, I think there were three other people in that group that night. And it's people who've turned out to be pretty much regulars who I'm used to seeing. Cause normally we might have an influx of one or two new people each week who may or may not come back with different frequency.

But in this group of what's turned out in my head to be the regulars there just such distinct people. And that was just so clear in the first conversation. There was a lot of diversity in the room in terms of perspective but also a tremendous amount of respect. That was really cool to see, to just have whatever was going on with me in the moment, but also to witness everybody else and where they were. I don't think I was particularly helpful to them in that meeting. But I hope that since then, I think there has been a give and take to the group that I think is really special that you people coming in at different moments and you know might have really pressing issues on a given week and everyone else kinda steps up and whoever that person in need is kind of shifts over time.

So it's a really awesome thing to be a part of.

J: What other programs have you done? I think you mentioned yoga.

M: Yes. So I try to, as often as I can, come to yoga. I come to usually the Tuesday night. It just changed instructors which was kind of a traumatic experience. That's just a testament to how much a part of my life that class became even though I wasn't able to come every week but was here as often as I could. Even my coworkers know that if it's Tuesday and it's 5:45 I'm gone like you cannot mess with Mary on her way to yoga. Because I think what I love about is it's not a typical yoga class. I am someone who, exercising is important to me, and I kept that up throughout my treatment, you know I'm a runner and I try to do that as much as I was physically able to. Because that was important to me feeling like myself. But so the great thing about this yoga class is there is no expectation of kind of the physical aspect of things and it's so inclusive and open to all ability levels. Or just however you're feeling on whatever day. You really just want to lie there and be quiet for a second.

That's totally accepted and encouraged. It might not be the most physically rigorous yoga class in the world which I love because anything that doesn't involve downward dog I'm happy. So it becomes more meditative and that became such an important part of my life as I was going through treatment and dealing with work and being stressed about a lot of different things. To have that hour within my week to just sit and relax and have the space to do that and just calm down a bit was really important to the point where when you changed instructors I didn't know if that would affect my sanity.

I literally I get this email and I go into my coworker's office and I'm just like...I don't know what's gonna happen? Like I'm ok now and I don't know how...dependent that is on this particular yoga class. So I think I'm ok.

J: Keep us posted on that.

M: I haven't come to the new one yet. Mostly for scheduling purposes but I will also give them a little time to get used to it...and then hopefully it will be ok.

J: We would love to hear how it is. Hopefully it's equally as good or maybe even better.

M: Yeah...it could be.

J: Ok. Ok, any other programs that you've been to at Smith Center?

M: Umm..yeah probably? I don't know. I guess I've come to a few informational, educational seminars. Health care, health insurance, kind of the practical elements of being a cancer patient. Because I think for me even though I've dealt with cancer throughout my whole life this is the first time in the last couple of years that it's been at the forefront in kind of an immediate way as an adult. So suddenly I'm in charge. I had to make decisions and I had to figure out how to manage my finances and pay the bills and figure out what made sense. Do longer term planning. It's been really helpful to have a space that provides information in those areas just specifically tailored to cancer patients.

It's great to hear the questions of other cancer patients and to learn from what they're learning as well.

J: Do you have any thoughts on the young adult programming here?

I think...ha ha..on the record. I think it's really helpful, I think it's an important thing. I mean I still go, basically every month I'm at the YA support group. And that's a helpful space because I think young adults dealing with cancer face a different set of issues than older adults faced with cancer. However, I do not know that the issues that I face align with those of the young adults. A lot of what I see in that group is, and I think it's totally valid, is if you imagine you're 20 something and 30 something and DC happens to be a very professionally competitive place, so I think it attracts a lot of go-getters who are on some kind of mission. And then if you get a cancer diagnosis a lot of that is put on hold or things change. And the mentality of a young adult who hasn't dealt with something like that before is kind of a sense of they're invincible. And this changes that. And that's upsetting and that's hard to deal with and that can generate anger and just really raw, negative emotions which I think are totally valid if that's your experience.

Because of the nature of my experience I don't seem to have those emotions to the same degree that generally speaking comes up from time to time in that group and I think that's a product of just because I have been dealing with cancer since I was born essentially you know if you think about it, my bar was set with cancer. So there was never a feeling of being invincible. So my perspective is like the inverse, I'm really happy when I don't have cancer. I'm not really surprised when I do. So I think that just effects my whole perspective on the experience. This year I spent a lot of time comparing what I was going through with my breast cancer treatment to what I dealt with as an adolescent which to me seemed like just scarier, riskier, more physically grueling. All that said, I understand that the young adults programming is valid and I still come because I understand that there are issues that I might speak about in that space that I don't in the general group.

But I think the general group because it tilts a little older my interpretation of it is that if you're diagnosed with cancer later in life on some level you've already considered your mortality and so it's not a huge shock. It might be upsetting or not what you wanted or expected. But I get the feeling that people are coming to that group, or the vibe of that group is, more in line where I am in relation to my cancer treatment.

J: Sure, ok. What has Smith Center meant to your healing process?

Everything. Yeah, no that's it.

But it's true, and it's interesting, I was in such a crazy, vulnerable place. Like I, my mental state when I came here a little over a year ago was like nothing I had ever experienced before. I was anxious, I wasn't sleeping, I was emotional, I was crying all the time. Like I was not ok. I knew I needed something and I found that here. I found a community, I found a set of activities that lend themselves to my mental well-being. To the point of when you start to take them away I notice. I remember when I finished treatment, ten months ago now, I came into group and it was the core group of us regulars. I said "I'm done with treatment, like great."

That was my update for the day and we had the whole group conversation and then as we're walking out the door one of the other group members was like "So, are you going to keep coming?"

I was like, "Are you kidding me? Like that's not even a question."

As if when I was done with treatment, oh Mary's fine again, she doesn't need us anymore. That's just not true at all. So there may be moments when I'm not as vocal as I was or may not have as many pressing, cancer-related things on the top of my mind. But this community is so important to my own processing of what I'm going through and what I've been through.

Because for me, it's interesting that I never really sought out support group or was never provided with any similar dynamic throughout my childhood and adolescence. This is the first time I really came and found it. So week to week when I come here I'm not only thinking about what I'm dealing with that week I'm actually making connections based on what I'm thinking, and feeling and saying and what other people are thinking, and feeling and saying and what I experienced 20 years ago. And that has been such a rich experience for me and I think for the people around me. I know that most times when I walk out the door here you know I have a 15 minute walk home and more often than not I call my mother.

Relay to her whatever I said in group or what was brought up in my mind or you know, whatever I was thinking about or realizing or making connections to what I was experiencing before or had some little memory and I couldn't figure it out exactly and maybe she would remember better. You know I recalled this one experience and was I interpreting that right? You know, how did she experience that? And sometimes I would apologize for something I said 20 years ago.

But I think it's been really wonderful for both of us to have those conversations. So for me to come here and have the space to process what I'm going through and then for both of us in, our relationship, to be able to process through my processing has been really wonderful.

J: Is there anything else you want to add?

M: So one thing I was thinking about like what is the benefit of group? Like, why? I realized something in a group we had recently where another patient came in and in her introduction or update she was talking about how she didn't really know what she was feeling on that day. There were like a lot of things floating around but she couldn't pinpoint or articulate what her experience was right then. I think that is probably a very typical experience of someone going through the experience of having cancer or treatment or survivorship. You know, there are a lot of emotions wrapped up in that and it can be hard to sift them all out and to articulate what you're experiencing. So I think the benefit of coming to group or what I've experienced is just having the space where you don't have to have it figured out. The second you walk in the door, you know, there's not a structure to it, you don't have to define anything. But through the process of talking about it you can figure out where you are or get closer to it.

That can be helpful in relationships outside of here. Where if I feel like a lot's going on and I'm overwhelmed and I don't know what it is or what to say it can be helpful to have the space to not have the pressure to know but to be encouraged and helped through the process of figuring it out so that in my relationships outside of here I can be a better advocate for myself.

It can be helpful to those around you by being clearer on where I am and what I need. Also I think the benefit that group provide, which I hear a lot of people talk about is, particularly the young adults, when you're in the middle of an experience with cancer, it can be overwhelming and it can consume your mind, body and spirit. It can be all you think about. But at the same time there's a desire to not have that affect your other relationships. I hear this particularly from the young adults, that you don't want to be the person that shows up to the cocktail party and is talking about cancer. You don't want that to be who you become or how people think of you. So I think it's really helpful to have the space where you can talk about all those issues so that you don't have to talk about it everywhere else. So I think that having that designated space to talk and to process and get things out that you might not talk about elsewhere can free you up to have your other relationships be more like they might have been without the intrusion of cancer which, I think, is what a lot of people want in their experience.