

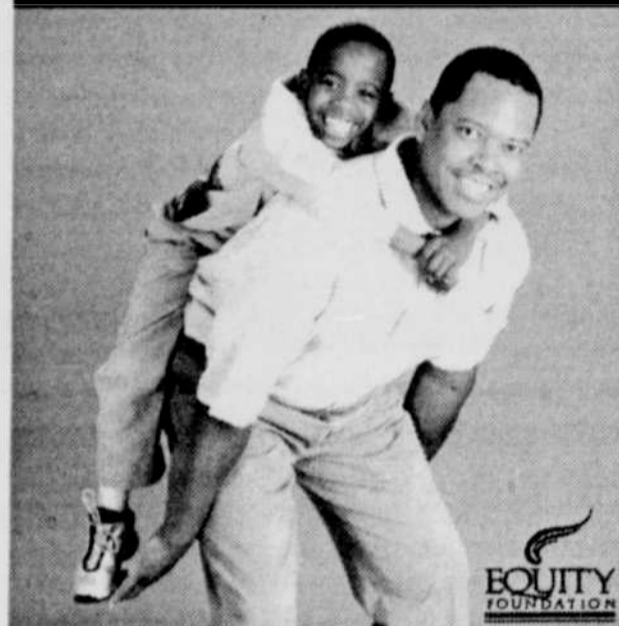


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# SURVIVING THE JOURNEY

**Cancer survivor: 'I don't sit around thinking about dying'**

by M.L. Madison

Spend just a few minutes with Laura Stride and the word "guts" imprints itself in your mind.

Stride isn't short of them. The 38-year-old Portland lesbian opted for a double mastectomy last December after being diagnosed with breast cancer, and she hasn't looked back.

"All the things I need to feel like a whole person, to feel happy, to feel sexy, to feel complete—my breasts were nowhere in that equation," said Stride, who showed her surgical scars during an interview with *Just Out*.

Stride, who does free-lance film production, was the location manager for *What the Bleep Do We Know?* She returned to work in July, after several months of cancer treatment.

"It's not like you can work on taxol and adriamycin," she noted, referring to her treatment, which is also known as the "a/c cycle."

Stride's ordeal began last November, on a trip to visit a friend in Montana. She'd had a suspicious lump outside her right breast for several months but hadn't gotten it checked.

During the drive to Montana, "I really started to think about it," Stride recalled. "I got really fearful. I thought, 'If I have let this go too long, I am really going to kick myself.'"

Stride went to a clinic in Bozeman to get the lump checked. She said the nurse practitioner "was pretty sure it was fine," but Stride was sent to a nearby hospital for a mammogram and an ultrasound just in case.

After returning home to Portland, her surgeon told her she was confident the tumor was malignant.

"She used the term 'malignant' about four times before she used the word 'cancer,'" Stride said. "They must break you in slowly."

"I've talked to other survivors about that moment when you get the news," she said. "I was just so mind-boggled.... I really thought I was going to die."

Stride decided at that moment to have a double mastectomy.

"I had a feeling I'd have it 10 years later in the other breast," she said. "I thought, 'I'm only going to do this once.'"

On Dec. 12, a surgeon removed both of Stride's breasts, a 5-centimeter tumor and 11 of her lymph nodes. She went through several months of chemotherapy and seven weeks of radiation after the surgery.

Stride said the chemo caused her to develop sores in her mouth and throat. What was more difficult, she said, was the emotional toll it took on her.

"They'll tell you you'll lose your hair and you'll be throwing up, but there's so much anxiety, so much emotional imbalance," she said. "There's this fear and this misery."

She said she couldn't have made it without the love and support of family and friends, who did everything from bringing her meals to changing her cat's litter box.

Stride's 38th birthday, April 19, was the day before her last chemotherapy treatment. She had planned a small get-together with her closest friends, and 24 people showed up.

"I felt so fortunate," she said. "I know people who don't have anyone."

She said doctors and nurses have told her that people with a solid support system "seem to do better" through their treatment.

Stride said she doesn't feel bitter about getting cancer, and she sees it as more of a journey rather than a "battle."

"What I find fascinating is that you've got to 'battle' cancer," said Stride, who describes herself as a peace activist. "I was thinking to myself, in battle and in war, it's wholly appropriate to be sleep-deprived, brainwashed. It is appropriate to operate from a complete place of fear—it's all this negative stuff. But the first message my oncologist gave me is proper nutrition, having your friends support you."

Rather than surviving the cancer itself, "the treatment is what I feel like I survived."

"You've got to have your mind, heart and soul on the same page," she said. "The chemo, it works to fracture you."

Less than three months after her last radiation treatment, Stride looks anything but fractured. She recently spent six days backpacking 53 miles through the Eastern Sierras.

On Sept. 19, she and a team of 14 others joined

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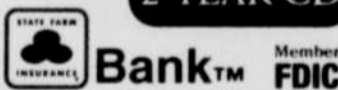
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