

# Between Cancer and COVID

Category: Cancer

written by Nina Bennett | June 14, 2021

In late fall of 2020, rumors were buzzing around the hospital where I worked about a possible retirement buyout package. My supervisor and I sat in our large conference room discussing what we had heard. I said, "If the offer is decent, I will probably accept the package. I don't want to work until I'm carried off the unit on a stretcher." Then, with my usual humor, I chuckled and added, "I tried that once and it didn't turn out so good."

In January 2020, I had collapsed at work and been hospitalized. Eight days later, I returned home with a cancer diagnosis. I had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL), a blood cancer. The irony did not escape me: I had worked with HIV patients since the beginning of the epidemic, and NHL was an early AIDS-defining cancer. Due to my debilitated condition, the aggressive nature of my cancer, and the highly toxic chemo regimen that is its standard treatment, I received my first treatment while I was hospitalized.

Following my second treatment, in February, my white blood cell count bottomed out, and I received a terse phone call from the nurse at the cancer center. I needed to mask any time I left the house, avoid crowds, and restrict visitors.

By the time my blood counts had improved, the entire country was on lockdown—wearing masks, avoiding crowds, and staying home. I was unable to have a support person with me during my five- to six-hour chemotherapy sessions, and no family members could be present the day I was unhooked from my final session.

I strongly resist the terminology that equates cancer to a battle. I never felt as though I was engaged in a war with cancer. I viewed it as a partnership. I was determined to become partners with my treatment team, my body, and even my cancer. I studied my weekly blood counts and talked to my white blood cells, incorporating them into my meditation and mindfulness practice.

I hope to reach a point where I'm not scared, where my anxiety doesn't spike before every blood draw and doctor visit. I hope that cancer will become a part of who I am, not all that I am. I took the retirement package, and I am appreciating and enjoying every single day. I revel in the opportunity to rebuild not only my health and strength, but also my life.

*Nina Bennett*

*Newark, Delaware*