

# The First Scar

Category: Courage

written by Sara Ann Conkling | March 4, 2022

In the early 1980s, I considered everyone at Thomas Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia to be my friend. As a volunteer and a vestry member at the nearby Episcopal church, I would often arrive at the ER with a homeless person who had come to the church for help after being badly injured. I was so impressed with how the doctors and nurses treated these patients that I developed a real affinity for the hospital.

So when I noticed a suspicious lesion on my arm, I knew where I wanted to go. I was correct in my assumption that the hospital was bigger than the emergency room, that it was a teaching hospital with a dermatology department. I was pretty sure I knew what this lesion was, and I figured it would be a good teaching case.

The resident assigned to my care viewed my lesion with grave concern when I described Gorlin-Goltz syndrome, a rare cancer that ran in my family. My mother had it, and I knew it was autosomal dominant. I feel sure that my mini-lecture sent him to the library to read more about the condition.

About a week later, the biopsy confirmed my suspicion. The resident sat down to give me the results. He held my hand, and there were tears in his eyes. He knew he was delivering a life-long sentence of skin cancer, plus whatever other manifestations of the disease I would suffer. I was upset, but maybe even more upset that he was upset.

I took a deep breath. "Look, you are going to do a great job with this," I assured him. "You're going to take this lesion off my arm, and then we're going to be vigilant for whatever else pops up. You will do great."

I'm pretty sure I was his first surgery, because the room was filled with people who were watching his every move. He took a king-sized chunk of flesh out of my arm. The wound was about two inches long. The margins came back clear, which was a welcome piece of news. "See, you did great," I said, using an "I told you so" voice.

Since that day, I've had to explain many times that the scar near my wrist is not a bungled attempt at self-harm. It's not a pretty scar. But I'm still thankful that I helped that resident find his courage.

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