

A Tribute to Cindy

"Are you a survivor?" I asked, acknowledging the pink ribbon pinned to her jacket. It seemed an unlikely question for a first meeting, but the sprite-like woman in the pink baseball cap responded "Trying to be!" and the bond with Cindy was instant. The noticeable absence of hair under the cap told me she had been through chemo. I, too, had been diagnosed with breast cancer three years before, but early detection had saved me from any procedure beyond a lumpectomy and diligent follow-up.

David and I had just arrived at South Carolina's Charleston Maritime Center. We were living aboard our newly purchased sailboat learning a new way of life. Cindy and Steve's boat *Celadon* was tied up next to ours on the wharf. Their two ill-mannered dogs lived aboard with them, barking and terrorizing our cat on a daily basis. "I blame it on the parents" mused Steve dryly as he dragged the dogs off our boat and up the wharf for a walk.

I learned about Cindy slowly. Some days I saw her walking past our boat with her dogs or heading out to do errands I supposed, but most days she kept to herself on the boat. Treading the fine line between friendliness and prying, I invited her aboard and we chatted about life in the marina and Charleston. I asked about her breast cancer. She was open and frank. She was 42 and had been fighting the disease for three years, having undergone all the usual procedures and then some.

Intensive internet research and a willing physician had allowed her to participate in several ongoing cancer drug studies, none of which were successful, but all of which had offered some hope. She related stories of the side effects of some of the drugs...nausea, vomiting, headaches, hands and fingers so blistered she had had to wear gloves. She never seemed to feel sorry for herself and never made me feel sorry for her. Rather, her energy and hope shone through and there was no doubt in my mind that she would make it. How could she not...she was so "up" and trying so hard. I asked her directly "Don't you get angry about this? Don't you feel it's unfair?"

She replied thoughtfully, "Sometimes, I guess. But it doesn't do any good, so why waste the energy." I remembered all too well the initial impact of learning I had breast cancer. First, the denial, then the fear and the tears, then the subsequent emotional roller coaster as I began to deal with it, then the utter relief after my first year exam was clear. I led a charmed and blessed life, and for me, the problem disappeared quickly and life went on. Not so for Cindy, it appeared she fought daily to make it to the next day of fighting.

It was nearing Christmas 2000 and Cindy wanted to participate in the annual Parade of Boats up Charleston's Ashley and Cooper Rivers. Steve had moved the boat to another marina for a few months and came to get us to help decorate. Cindy, not feeling well, had still managed to make hot chocolate for us. The night of the parade was freezing cold and raining. Twenty or more people crowded onto their boat as we found our place in the lineup and cruised up the river, shivering in our foul weather gear. Our lights barely shone due to an underpowered generator, but spirits were high. Cindy sat huddled in sweaters and blankets down below surrounded by a crowd of friends, perhaps not feeling well, but glowing at the center of activity.

We said our goodbyes shortly after Christmas as we headed South to Florida and the Bahamas for the rest of the season. Steve owned an upscale shop and had moved Cindy to a rented house nearby for the cold winter months. I knew I'd see her the following year, so the goodbye was only temporary. Despite the cancer, I had no doubt that she'd be there and our return the following November reinforced my belief when we pulled into the Maritime Center and saw their boat along side the wharf.

It was a heartfelt reunion, but my first glimpse of Cindy made me gasp. I had thought her frail six months before, but now she seemed as pale and breakable as a china doll. A little hair had grown back, there was no need for further chemo she told me. She was still researching possible drug

studies, but it seemed most of the possibilities had been exhausted. I visited her daily now, if only for a few minutes. She tired easily, but preferred to live on the boat for as long as possible. Her Mom came to stay for a few days. Her sister came and an endless parade of friends and relatives. She had a way of making it easy for people to visit; everyone felt good when they left.

Thanksgiving arrived and we invited Cindy and Steve for the turkey feast, doubting they would accept the invitation. We were pleasantly surprised when Cindy said they'd really like to join us with the caveat she could renege at the last minute if she didn't feel well. The big turkey wouldn't fit into our little galley oven, but the Maritime Center let us use their kitchen for turkey and pies. A beautiful day dawned and we hoped Cindy would be up for the dinner. She was not only "up", she said she felt better than she had in days. She arrived with a huge bouquet of her favorite Shasta daisies and settled comfortably onto the settee. She ate ravenously "Everything tastes good today."

During the course of the dinner, we discovered Cindy had never tried lobster. Being a born and bred New Englander, I found it hard to believe and determined that this grievous situation needed to be remedied. They were moving the boat again the following week to its winter marina and had rented a house for the upcoming cold months. We set a date the following week for a lobster feast at the new house.

Steve picked us up at the appointed time and we shopped for lobsters and had them steamed while we gathered all the accompaniments. When we arrived, Cindy greeted us at the door looking more wan and pale than ever. "Are you feeling up to this?" I asked. "I'm not feeling up to anything these days, but if I don't do it now, I may never do it. Bear with me, I'm fine." She had nibbled at the lobster and raved how good it tasted, but it was evident this was a trial for her. She tired early and went to bed. We stayed over and helped with the cleanup.

Since they were well out of town now and it was the busy Christmas season, we didn't see her for a couple of weeks. Her family was in town visiting and the socializing at the marina kept our "dance card" filled. We decided to get together for New Year's Eve and hitched a ride with another cruiser. We walked in the door to find about twenty people milling around, drinks in hand, but no Cindy. She was in bed, I was told, go ahead in.

I was flabberghasted. If I thought she had looked frail and fragile in the past, it was nothing compared to the scene before me. Cindy lay in the middle of her bed, friends lying next to her, chatting quietly. She looked so tiny and feeble, swallowed up by the bedcovers. She motioned me towards her and others made room for me to crawl up next to her.

"Oh, Cindy, girl. What's happening?"

"I'm getting tired", she responded and I knew it wasn't just from the evening.

"I wanted to tell you I love you", she said, her voice was raspy and low.

"I love you, too, honey" and I choked back the tears.

We all lay together for what seemed an eternity. Then one by one, the friends left as Cindy slept.

The group dispersed shortly after midnight. Steve had asked for some time alone with Cindy. She died early on New Year's Day with Steve and her dogs at her side.

She wasn't a saint. I'm sure she had her faults and bad habits. I just never saw them. Her relationship with her partner was strong and sweet till the very end. What I observed was a strong spirit in a fragile body. I witnessed courage, persistence and a grace beyond any I had ever experienced. I knew I was blessed to have been a small part of her life and thank God for such experiences each year when I raise my glass on New Year's Day in a toast to Cindy and to living.

