

Judy's journey from darkness into light.

Judy von Chrismar struggled for months to find a way to live with her breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. Given it was an experience her mother, sister and several friends had also been through, she was perplexed when she found herself sinking into a dark hole.

Twelve years earlier Judy had battled bowel cancer, then a major liver cancer operation followed by months of chemotherapy. She'd travelled widely, lived and worked overseas, experienced personal loss and faced difficult times before, so why had this latest challenge left her feeling so flat and so numb?

Despite successful surgery and "wonderful" support, Judy struggled emotionally, physically and spiritually until an amazing breakthrough.

A year after her diagnosis, she sat down to pen what is an honest and deeply personal account of her breast cancer journey.

"The experience of writing is a very good therapy, although you need to know when you're ready – it's not something you can force," Judy said.

My breast cancer journey

by Judy von Chrismar

October 7, 2017:

It's dawned on me that it was a year ago, almost to the day, that my breast cancer journey began. Hans (*husband*) and I were walking on Lighthouse Beach when I became aware of a sensation in my right breast.

There was a small lump.

It was tender, but not overly sore. I mentioned it to Hans, but neither of us were very concerned, although I did realize I would need to get it checked out.

The doctor agreed there was definitely a lump - perhaps it was a cyst, because of the tenderness.

The mammogram and ultrasound appointment on the Monday left me feeling something was not right; the staff may as well have said so.

The following week Hans came with me to the follow up appointment with my doctor; I think we both had an instinct about what was to unfold.

The tests revealed cancer in both breasts.

I'd been really down-in-the-dumps since the last leg of our three-month trip around Europe. I was sure I would bounce back when I arrived home, but I didn't.

"I think we both had an instinct about what was to unfold. The tests revealed cancer in both breasts."

I had blood tests and the like done – nothing wrong. Now, two months later, the news of cancer – in each breast.

The reality hit hard. I knew I was not in a good state to face up to this.

October 27, 2016:

Over to a new doctor, a specialist surgeon. We did know something about what would probably happen next and the potential consequences – my Mum had died of breast cancer at 53 years and my sister had one of her breasts removed at 53 years.

There really wasn't a lot of decision-making to be done, and the surgeon confirmed our thoughts – double mastectomy.

Next, a week of appointments at the hospital, then over to the Mid North Coast Cancer Institute in Port Macquarie for more information and to meet the anaesthetist, a good guy, though I didn't take to him that first day.

I was pretty much in a daze at this point I must admit. I didn't really want to go through with this, but you just don't stop there in midair.

So many of my friends as well as my Mum and my sister had been on this journey, so why wasn't I coping?



Judy von Chrismar

November 11, 2016

The first task was to have the imaging done – that was not so pleasant, then into the private hospital.

Hans dropped me at the hospital. I was still in a state of numbness; however, I do have to say, with all these appointments and procedures, everyone was so caring.

Into the operating theatre at around 1pm. They'd had lunch, so that was good to know.

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I think it was around 4.30pm I was wheeled back to my room. I had not one ounce of pain – weird, as the surgeon had told me 'no pain', but of course I couldn't comprehend that.

There was a large mirror in my room - not sure if that is a good idea, but when I did get out of bed to put something else on, in the mirror I thought I

looked OK. I'm not sure what I expected to see; I still had a chest, but there was never much in the boobs area for me anyway.

Funnily enough I really didn't feel too bad. Hans came in, Jessie and Simon (*friends*) called in. I ate dinner, which was great. I felt ready to do some exercise, but the nurse put a stop to that idea.

It was a noisy night – hospitals can be like that, but the staff were very good. My surgeon appeared, took a look at me, and was very pleased. I was in good spirits too, although I think it was probably the drugs (?).

I was told I'd be able to go home that day, and not to worry about the two tubes and bags protruding from the wound – the district nurse would come each day to assist me I was told.

After a 'spill' from the site of my surgery (which was rather alarming), the nurse reassured me and taped up the tubing. Breakfast arrived – I took a few mouthfuls and noticed the area under my left arm was all swelling up. The nurse came in; oh dear – thankfully my surgeon was in the operating theatre, so they would alert him.

By the time he arrived more swelling had appeared. It was a haematoma and I needed to go back into the operating theatre to have it drained. So, no more food for me, and I wouldn't be going home today 😞.

I clearly remember thinking I was doing really well at that point, so I decided it would be nice to go into the bathroom, wash myself over, put on a fresh gown, clean my teeth and the like. There was a knock at the door; the door opened, and

my surgeon appeared to say, "see you around noon, no worries etc." before closing the door.

Next thing I felt my legs going to jelly and in that slow-motion moment, I just allowed myself to crumple to the floor. Somehow, I did manage to press the emergency button, but the episode was only momentary, so I stood up slowly, put on the gown and then the nurse appeared.

Everything was 'go slow' from then on. I remember neighbours arriving to visit and being wheeled around into the operating theatre.

Back on the operating table again; all went OK, but yes, there was an enormous bruise all the way down my left side, although no pain. They brought me back to another room nearer reception to keep an eye on me.

Marian (*cousin*) and Michael popped in – it was really good to see them. Hans arrived; I was pretty upbeat, I remember phoning a few friends.

Next morning, I was given the OK to go home, so slowly but surely I sorted myself out and prepared to leave. I was given two draw-string bags to carry the two tubes and bags holding the drained fluid – quite a sight I would imagine.

November 12, 2016

Home James.

Antony (*son*) arrived and I was all good really. I slept quite alright, however panic started to set in next morning. Pam (*friend*) came over with some food and then the district nurse arrived. She went through some basic matters, then started to explain the process of measuring the fluid in the bags, and what needed to be done when the bags filled up. I found this pretty overwhelming, given it seemed I was going to be left to do it all myself, despite being told the district nurse would be in to help me every day. I was feeling quite stressed by now.

Thank goodness the nurse organized for someone to come when the bags needed to be changed. The other district nurses who came were wonderful. Although I did survive the days of fluid measuring and bag changing, I was very pleased when they were removed; even more so when the nurse removed the clips as well.

I must mention, that between the clips and stitches being removed, I woke one morning in a pool of blood. In the mirror I saw there was a small hole in my side.



Hans and Judy von Chrismar

Hans gave me a towel, packed a bag and rushed me to the Base hospital. All went very well – such a great hospital we have. A stitch or two had broken, so a young doctor stitched me up.

All good – home James, again.

Nov-Dec, 2016

Over the next few weeks fluid did continue to build up under my left arm. The surgeon was so good – he drained it each time, no problem, probably 5 times in all. Time seemed to go by so slowly for me at this point, but finally, just before Christmas, the fluid problems stopped altogether.

During this period, I was feeling so sad and so utterly flat. I really didn't want to be anywhere – no appetite – no energy.

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My oncologist had prescribed a drug used to treat hormone receptor-positive breast cancer; I don't think it agreed with me (nausea, diarrhea, no taste or appetite).

My GP suggested I give it a break over Christmas. Ingrid (*daughter*) and Antony (*son*) and his girlfriend Shali were with us from time to time over the Christmas period, but I still couldn't feel any emotions. It was horrible; I just spent most of my days in bed feeling so unhappy, and it was certainly not an easy time for everyone else around me.

Christmas Day was very flat, but Hans gave me loads of encouragement, and I did manage to have a bit of an appetite. However, after New Year I had to go back on the hormone-therapy drug and I continued to struggle, feeling very down and not at all fun to be with.

The support offered through this dark time was wonderful, for which I am still so grateful – the Mid North Coast Cancer Institute staff were wonderful, and my GP was fantastic. Friends were also very understanding, not at all expectant of me.

By the time the end of January came, I was really not good; I'd lost weight, had no energy and no interest in anything. I looked at myself and really wondered “why am I here?”. I certainly did not want to be, I know that.

My GP and local Breast Cancer Support Nurse suggested I go back to the oncologist to discuss my medication. I'd stopped taking the hormone therapy drug by then, which he wasn't very happy about; he suggested I start on a similar one immediately. When Hans and I explained our reluctance, it was agreed I would have 4 weeks off, during which time I saw dietitians and psychologists, who I do think really helped and supported me.

March 7, 2017

It was at this point that my journey took a remarkable twist. I had been struggling with my faith – I'd read Thomas Kennelly's book *Crimes of the Father*, and the findings from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which I found distressing. I was feeling angry and I wasn't going to church.

I should have mentioned earlier that the day before I was due in hospital, Hans had gone to his church where he and others prayed into a cloth which went with me to hospital and then stayed with me. At the time I didn't have much in the way of prayer in me. Yes, they were dark days.

"At the time I didn't have much in the way of prayer in me. Yes, they were dark days."

On Tuesday March 7, Ingrid phoned for a chat and said to me "Mum, just say over and over 'the joy of the Lord is your strength' – you don't need to think about it too much, just say it."

As I fell off to sleep, I remembered and repeated those words in my head.

The next day (Wednesday) I had an amazingly strong feeling, along with vivid memories of my Mum and my guardian angel Minava – this, in itself, gave me focus and probably a bit of strength.

On Thursday Hans came home from U3A with a small parcel from the letterbox. It had no name on it, but Hans insisted it must be for me. I opened it; still no name, just a small, second-hand prayer book.

The parcel turned out to be from my cousin Marian, and I latched onto that small book; it so spoke to me.

On the Friday I felt pretty much back to my old self again – a little edgy at first but as the day progressed, so did I. I went to Pam's meditation group, then on to do all our shopping, absolutely full of life.

In all this I do I realize that there were a few things that may have helped me come through all the darkness I felt. My visits to the psychologist and dietician had a positive effect, plus my friend Mary had put me onto a protein powder, which also helped.

But honestly, in all this I recognize I had the spiritual support of prayer and thoughts from many directions, so I do believe the way my journey went was like I had been carried through those rough dark waters.

I did have an inward battle going on with respect to my faith, and I spoke with a couple of friends about my struggle to go to mass given all the anger I had felt towards my church, and still did feel.

In the end I received so much grace through this difficult time – even though I certainly was not aware of it in the darkness.

My friend described my coming into the light again as having the scales peeled back from my eyes; I do like that explanation.

Looking forward, I find myself at ease with whatever the future may hold.

I recognise that I have grown enormously through all this.

Thank you for sharing Judy



More about Judy

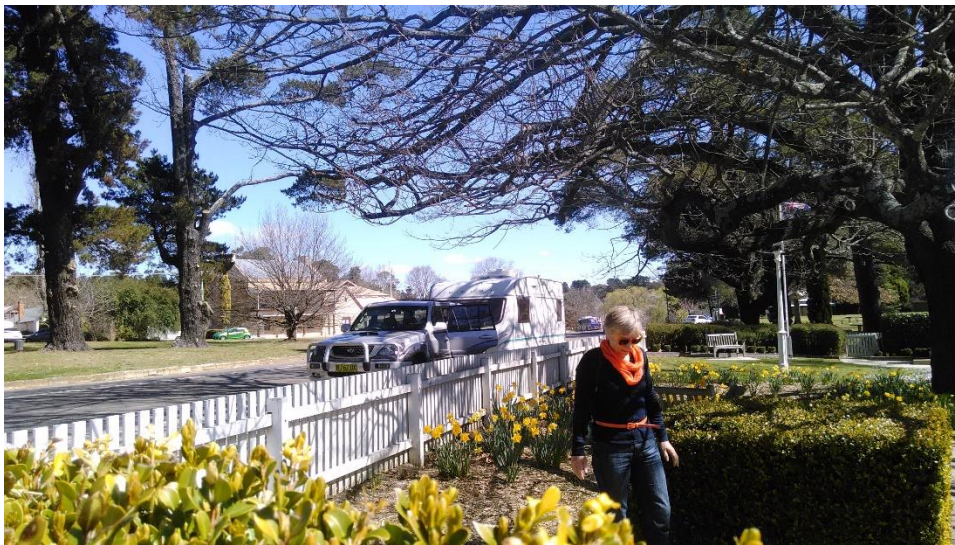
Born in Geelong, Judy met her Dutch-born husband, Hans von Chrismar, when they both took up jobs in Papua New Guinea in 1969. They went on to marry and have two children, Ingrid and Antony, plus four grandchildren.

The pair moved from the NSW Central Coast to Port Macquarie in 2014 in search of an enjoyable, low-maintenance lifestyle. Judy's had an on-going involvement in church life for many years, and also has a passion for Tai Chi.

Despite brilliant support and the best efforts of her friends and family, Judy struggled emotionally, physically and spiritually during her breast cancer journey.

Almost a year later, she sat down and started writing, and this raw account is the result. Given her struggles, it took a great deal of courage to revisit what was a dark and difficult time in Judy's life.

She is proud to share her story as part of the Hastings Cancer Trust "Our Stories" Project, and hopes others may be able to relate to it in some way.



This story was written and supplied by Judy von Chrismar in November, 2017.

It forms part of the Hastings Cancer Trust's "Our Stories" Project. For more information, or to read this and other stories online, go to www.hastingscancertrust.org.au.