Cancer Changed Everything, Except Her Joy : Lessons on Living Fully with Elizabeth Roberts Transcript

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Podcast Introduction and Liz's Story

Welcome to the Doctors Making a Difference podcast where we help physicians to be empowered with the tools they need to successful in medicine, in finance and in life.

Join us as we highlight doctors and other professionals around the world who are making a difference. Today's discussion is kind of a special one. I have one of my friends who's dealing with metastatic breast cancer as a guest.

Liz Roberts is the founder of the Happy Wanderer Travel Company, a very positive and uplifting person who has been dealing a really challenging diagnosis.

And I respect Liz and her approach to a challenging disease. She told me once, go and do the things. If there's something you've been meaning to do, boy, just put it on the calendar and save up for it while you got two legs to it, while have the time and health and energy.

That doesn't mean put off your family or things of that nature, but put on a calendar. Do the things while can do them because life presents so many challenges and you don't know what the next chapter holds.

I really appreciate Liz Roberts and I look forward to sharing this podcast with you. I'm really honored today to be able to have as a guest one of my friends, Liz Roberts is a friend.

She lives in my same community and has been an example to me and to my family. So I was so honored that she would take the time to share her experience and her example of dealing with metastatic cancer.

It's a rotten diagnosis. it's, it' a club that nobody wants to part of. But I just appreciate Liz and what she has taught to others who are in her circle.

And again, I'm really pleased that you would do that. So Liz, would you mind introducing yourself in more detail to our audience? Yes. Hi. I am Liz and I've had cancer now for four years.

In fact, in this week, it will be four exactly that I started chemotherapy for my first time. And I was diagnosed with breast cancer. And then about a year and a half ago, it spread.

And so I got another diagnosis of brain cancer and it's spread to my spine. So something called Leptomeningeal disease. It's still considered breast cancer, but in my brain and spine, But I've slowed down quite a lot since I had cancer.

I just kind of had to, because I'm so tired all the time. But, I believe that life is supposed to be fun. And I really got that out of the scriptures.

So I don't think we're supposed mope about, even if we have cancer, or even we do have a due date, which is in two months for me, but I do believe in miracles and with a good attitude.

Cancer Diagnosis and First Reactions

Life is still fun! Liz, you're so brave. And again, I appreciate you explaining that. Again, this podcast goes to a lot of physicians, but a lots of people who listen are other folks who are dealing with cancer because it's something that I deal with.

So it is meaningful and relevant to hear the experience of someone who has walked that path. Would you just for a minute describe the somewhat unintended way that you found out about breast cancer?

Because I think that's unique and maybe kind of starts this journey a little bit. how I found out that I had breast cancer. Yeah, about your diagnosis.

Oh, yeah. First of all, I was doing self-exams. So I thought there was something there. I went to my doctor. They did the biopsy. And so we're like, okay.

Then I get a text on my app, on phone, in my chart that says, you have cancer, basically. So I found out I had cancer sitting in my house reading my phone by myself, and I was just like, you hear that word, but You think a lot of things about other people getting cancer.

You never think that you're the one that's going to get cancer." So I took a screenshot of that and I sent it to my friend who's a doctor, my friends husband, and he immediately called me back.

And I was like, crap, because I didn't know all these words. But yeah, that was how I found out I had cancer I'm so sorry, Liz. I think it's instructive for the physicians listening.

We're all about patients having access to their information and their test results. But I've encountered that sometimes as a doctor, we put out all these results and it is so quick.

And unless you have done something really specific to limit the person's ability to see the information, the patient is often able to access the info before I see it.

Sometimes that's fine, many times that is fine. It's their But I feel like in your case, it would have been so much better to sit down knee to knee, eye to eye with someone and say, let's go over the details of what this means.

Yeah. Cancer is a big word and it means lots of different things for lots diseases. And you really didn't have that other than you did have a friend who's married to a physician.

So you were able to get a little bit of context. What a wild way to find out something so heavy and so overwhelming as cancer. My other option was Google.

I know I didn' t want to Google that. I thought, I don't want these words. I want to type up these word. So I was grateful I could talk to a doctor. But yeah, agree with you.

There are some results you just can't get like that. Yeah. Well, it is kind of mean and in some ways it's not the physician's fault. The system is set up such that the data just drops in and it' yours and its in your hands.

And again, you don't want to restrict information, but how you deliver information is really important. Sometimes you just need to know someone is going to go on that journey with you and help you.

You're not just cast aside because you have a difficult diagnosis. Yeah, that's exactly right. Liz, let's back up for a minute. Again, Liz Roberts, you guys on the podcast don't know Liz.

Liz is someone who lives life to the max. She got to be an empty nester, she and her husband, and instead of saying like, oh, lets just sit around and watch the grass grow and enjoy relaxation, She started a travel company where you can travel the world with Liz and she took people all over the place and is just like so excited to share And so you had really gotten that off the ground and going in the middle of all this.

And if you don't mind kind of tell about how that business was affected. We have kind a personal connection on how bad intersected with your diagnosis.

I've shared with my listeners that I had a type of sarcoma called solitary fibrous tumor. So your and my diagnosis

kind jives, share that story if he would.

OK, yeah, my daughter lives in Switzerland, and so my husband's a school employee. I'm like, well, that doesn't really jive, you know, being able to afford trips to Switzerland every other week when we've got grandbabies.

And so I had to come up with a… career that would get me to Switzerland a lot.

Travel Business and Living Through Treatment

And so I just started this company called Happy Wanderer and I would take up to 10 people at a time and we'd go to Europe, mostly Switzerland. But my first trip ever was a trip to France.

I got my cancer diagnosis like two or three weeks before I was supposed to leave and was suppose to start chemotherapy. had knowledge of the French language from having served a missionary.

And I asked her, like, would you take this tour for me? Like, be my employee. I'm like I'll pay for everything. You just go and take all these people and do my tour.

For me, and she is so great, Christy. When she took my Tour, I found out when she got home that you had been diagnosed while she was on the tour. You had some tests and stuff and it all came to light while was she on my tour, so I was home in the comfort of however much comfort your home provides you, which was a lot while I going through this, and she out taking my 10 people around France.

and you were home alone dealing with that. I'm just so grateful that she was still willing to do that for me and she had a great time and so did everybody else with her.

She did love the trip and it was really neat but you know the point in this that I wanted to make is when somebody gets a diagnosis of cancer or a tumor or something along those lines it can feel really challenging and I would say no matter who you are it has an effect on your life and your loved ones and people.

So in my case, I knew I had a mask, but I needed to get it biopsied. But by the time the results all came through and it was ready to kind of decide what we were going to do, she was on a trip to Europe with your group.

And so I have this late night for her. We met with the oncologist at the cancer center over the phone. Christy was very far away, a lot of time zones difference, trying to sneak in there and listen to what was going on.

Anyway, it's kind of a crazy story. But I guess the point, and you did the same thing, Liz, you just have to still live your life and still find those moments of joy.

Because I'll note that even though that was one of your first trips, It was not your last. You went on several trips. Even kind between radiation and cancer and surgery, there's always some information about, oh, this is headed on another trip.

She's going to go see her kids. So I want to hear a little bit about that chapter. How have you done that? Despite something that's a real challenging diagnosis.

Yeah, it was a challenging Diagnosis and it it almost more Stressful to think about than to live through because I never got sick. I Never threw up my first round of counselor And I felt pretty good.

They still had my energy. Had this looming diagnosis and I was bald But I still felt good and they still thought like I had something to share so I still went for it.

I made sure I had some people in the wings that could take my tours for me if I took a turn. And I did have a hard situation because I also got hit by a car by drunk driver when I was walking down the street.

And so I had a concussion. So I have to get one of my people, which was my youngest daughter, to go with me on this tour, just so that I didn't forget stuff.

I forget everything. Forget where I was. And you know, we just do these little backups so you can manage the best you could. It was great. They've all been great tourists.

When you got hit by that car, I know you discovered that there was metastasis to the brain. Is that when they found out that because sometimes they'll do imaging of the brains after a car wreck?

Or how did you end up finding that you had a brain and spine metasthesis? I did get a bump on the head. That's how I got my concussion from that. Car accident.

And it happened to be the exact spot where my brain cancer showed up. I got a tumor right in the back of my, well, let's see, it was- On your right side.

Back right. Yeah. But they said it had nothing to do with the junk driver or whatever. And I just had headaches since the car accident, just headaches.

And pretty soon they got really bad, like really, bad headaches and everybody thought I had a migraine. Tell me what to do with the migraines. I'm like, okay, it's going on a week now.

being awake. And anyway, I was in Switzerland actually and kept going to the hospital because these headaches were just so bad. I wasn't in the hospitals for like three or four days there and finally they did a CAT scan and they could see that there was a large tumor there.

So I came home immediately and had brain surgery within the week. For the doctors listening, you'll appreciate that there's a difference between the healthcare systems.

In the U. S., if you bump your head and you go to the ER, the CAT scan is ordered before the patient even arrives in the E. R. It seems like in Switzerland, they're probably a little bit more conservative on use of large-scale radiations.

Brain Metastasis, Surgery, and Medical Care

But in your case, it really discovered what was going on with your brain. So in some ways, kind of a blessing to figure that out. Yeah, they ended up doing an MRI before they released me to fly home.

And if I'd been flying alone, I don't know what would have happened. They said I had to have a medical escort, but Brian was with me, thank goodness. So we both flew home after that, and they said it was for sure a tumor.

But at that point, we didn't Cancer or not? I mean, we did know because the triple positive cancer that I had in my breast was known to come back. We were expecting it to comeback.

And I was, my husband wasn't. But my brain surgeon said that they can't really tell by looking at it. They have to send away a sample to find out for sure if it's cancer.

and they don't guess about it because it is too often too wrong. After I woke up from brain surgery, he said, it's definitely cancer. Like he could tell without a doubt.

So yeah, I was glad to be at the Huntsman, glad be in my own country and I'm very well taken care of. Well, Liz, it's such a crazy story and I appreciate your willingness to share it.

And I guess just to reflect for a minute to those who are listening, you know, I think we can all put ourselves in the shoes of what Liz is saying. Nobody knows what that's like to walk it till you've walked it, but I can tell you, from my own experience, that it is so hard to receive that diagnosis and there's so much uncertainty and so much unknown

and yet you still have to proceed forward with life and take care of your family and your responsibilities and you're kids.

I wanted to kind of hear, you've had such a positive bright outlook on that. How have you done that? Like most people get a little bit just withdrawn, they don't want to talk about it and maybe they're a nervous about it or maybe ashamed or embarrassed or, you know, a whole host of emotions.

Yeah. You have been open, kind, bright, and you've chosen to take the positive route. And I want to hear how that came about. I actually don't know where I heard it at first, but at the first I said the C word, then I thought, no, it's cancer.

It's Hi, mom. How's my cancer's doing? Great. Your kids, cancer doesn't seem to be affecting me too much today. Let's go do something. Or, you know, I said the word a lot so that people weren't afraid to say it back to me and they weren' afraid of talk about it.

Cause I think the more you talk something, the easier it is for one thing. And I really think that helped me just to like cancer is now part of my life.

It's not less of a life, It's not more of a life, it's just an experience that I'm having this cancer, and other people have it too. And you can have cancer and you could be happy, or you have to have a cancer or just be sad.

I have have the cancer. So I might as well be and do as many things as I can do with the cancer and enjoy what is still fully available to me, which is my family.

You really discover what matters to you and what's important. I was so busy before. You know, my business and my family and visiting my kids and fixing up the house, whatever.

You really find out what's important to you when you have to narrow it down because of your energy and everything. And I feel like it's a blessing in some ways, because I really feel I found out the meaning of life, the purpose of our lives here.

Liz, thank you for sharing. I just reflect for a minute because you and I found diagnoses around the same time. And I remember in the first phases of that, especially now I'm multiple years into the treatment and kind of in a holding pattern right now, but I remembered specifically in those first six months, just exactly what you just said.

to realize what's really important. And you know what? It's not stuff. It was love. Like the people I really cared about and the relationships I cared and spending time with the causes I believe in.

And the other thing I found, I'm interested, you probably never had fear of anything in your life, but I became fearless. I don't care what people think.

i've already been told I have cancer and I might die. What else can you take from me? Certainly you could take my family or something else that would be really challenging.

But in some ways, it gave me a perspective and a fearlessness that I still try to remember today. And I hope it helps to reframe how to see another person not as a failed person in their mortal experience, but someone who's going through a challenge in life.

But they're probably still a decent person. It helped just reframe my perspective. How has it reframed or changed your perspective on dealing with other people and dealing life?

Choosing Positivity and Expanding Compassion

Oh, it has expanded my heart so much. I can't believe it. Like I'm a people person, I guess. I've never had a problem loving people, but boy, that's expanded.

And I love people in all their faults, in their bad choices and everything, I just think. man I wish you would do something to make your life happy instead of hard but I love you and as different people have had different challenges with their families or yeah just their own challenges and I watch them make choices that are hurting them, and I think, man, I just love them.

And I that's how God sees us a little bit, like we're going through all these challenges or making mistakes, And he just thinks, Man, they love you. I love him.

They want you to be happy. That's just how I feel about people now. No, totally get it, Liz, because you can choose the path of bitterness and frustration and why me or you can choose the Liz Roberts route, which is, I can chose to see the blessings, the love, and maybe just a little bit of that godly perspective of how valuable and how well you are seen by the divine and I think that's really powerful and it reshapes your experience.

And it's almost like you talk to older people who, you know, in their eighties and nineties and they've gained that perspective through a lifetime of challenge.

and suddenly, Liz, if you get this diagnosis when you're in your forties or fifties, suddenly you have to like really quick, fast forward, gain some of that.

Perspective because yeah, You have. To kind of deal with your own mortality in a way that you never have had to deal and you realize that other people.

And we're just on this earth temporarily and how we treat each other and the way that we interact with each is probably more important than the stuff we have or where we live or pretty much anything else.

Yeah. Well, so Liz, somebody listening to this has just received this heavy diagnosis of cancer or they're listening and one of their loved ones has, or maybe it's a physician who's just told somebody the worst news they could tell them.

Yeah. What would you tell someone in those first few weeks after that kind of diagnosis as far as perspective and how to handle that? Yeah, the first thing you need to do is accept it and understand it.

And I think one thing that was really hard for me was when they told me I had cancer, my first appointment, they just threw all this stuff at me, all the things I would have to do, but also like the help groups or support groups that were available, like all of this.

And, I just wanted to say, just take a step back, unless you have start treatment that day or something. But just take a step back one step at a time.

And if it's you that have the diagnosis, you know, You can keep it to yourself for as long as you can. But then you want to share with your loved ones so they can not only support you, but pray for you and everything.

I think, yeah, just taking it slowly at first, but not being ashamed, or I thing it's such a strange thing that people would feel ashamed because of their diagnosis, like they weren't living a real life now, that now they had to shut it off.

But we're on this earth to learn, is what I believe, and there's no better way than through some life-changing illness to really learn what it is all about.

and how you want to interact with people and invite people into your life that you maybe hadn't before because you were in a different place now. I don't know if that makes sense.

No, that's beautiful. And I agree when that happens, you can keep it to yourself for a little while, but the experience is meant to be shared with friends and loved ones eventually.

Yeah. That circle gets wider. I've been really surprised in some ways that instead of feeling rejected or like, oh, well, let's pass that guy by, he's got the C word, or he got cancer.

It's better just to like oh hey, Welcome to mortality. You have a trial too. It kind of helps you to realize we're all broken in some ways. And it's helpful you realize, we are just all in the stew together.

As you sort of accept it and pull people in, just like you said, with your friends and family, it is not a diagnosis I would want anybody to have to deal with.

But there is a positive way to do it. Liz, you've been so exemplary in your approach to it! Well, thank you. I always tell people, like, I would never wish cancer on anyone.

No one would I wish it on. But this experience has been huge for me. And I've grown a lot, and I learned a whole lot. Yeah, just the compassion you have for other people who are going through hard things and…

I wouldn't give it up. That's amazing you would say that. The back half of that question is now, four years into this, you see the advancing part of cancer.

And not everybody who gets a cancer diagnosis will pass away as a result.

Facing Mortality and Planning the Time Ahead

There's lots of treatments and there's lot of things where people can live with the cancer for a long, long time or perhaps it'll be cured or put into remission for decades.

So it depends on the type. But I wanted to gather your perspective on advancing cancer. And you said at the beginning, hey, maybe I have an expiration date.

Maybe I don't get to live the same length of time as I would have envisioned four years ago. How do you approach that? Because that's a subject that I think is really hard for me.

It's hard everybody to think about, like, if I had to face that chapter, how do I be brave during that or how to navigate those waters with my family or others?

I just wanted hear your perspectives on that. Well, I think as long as you're talking about cancer like a normal amount, which would be kind of a lot if it's new, like you'd be talking to your family about Cancer and things and then you just kind, of I don't know maybe just my family.

I just kinda threw it out there. Yeah, well, i've got an expiration date, you know, maybe in one year. Maybe I've Got one your left. What should we do with that year?

And it's been pretty fun, actually. I spent a few months in a wheelchair. Was it a couple months or like one month? But I couldn't do very much at all.

But my husband and I just started taking drives. Drives through the beautiful country and, you know, at the right time of day when the sun is beautiful.

just found other ways to kill our days. But if you're talking to your family about your life and what you want to do in the next few months, like, what if this is my last Christmas, for example?

Let's all get together. We had some great experiences because it might be my We are all hoping and praying, and we believe in miracles. And so we believed that I might last longer than September is the date they gave me.

But so, we're like, yeah, but if you do live, then this and this. They're just saying that without tears and, you know, because it's a normal conversation.

Hey, if we are still around next year, We should go on this cruise or whatever. And at first it was hard. It was to say that. And everybody would cry.

But now we don't. Man, Liz, thank you. I am thinking of just what a cheerful and brave, kind person you are, because that is very hard. And those are some of the heavier parts of life.

But I do think that it's really important to retain that perspective that, like you said earlier, just because my time is short and doesn't mean that time without value.

To say, well, if I've got this time, what can we do on the days when I feel great? Let's do that. How can I spend time with people that I love? Anyway, I admire your bravery during that.

But I also think that's an interesting approach to talk to your family and say like, okay, that is not a taboo subject. Let's talk about it and figure out what we'll do now and what will do later if I get the opportunity.

And then maybe the second part of that, is the legacy you build for your loved ones, anybody that has cancer. If it takes our lives, I don't want to be remembered as that bitter sick guy that stayed in bed all the time and didn't talk to anybody because he was mad.

I'd rather them say this was the hopeful person who dealt with one of life's biggest trials in a way that was still positive and still giving back and trying to leave the world better than he found it.

What comments do you have on that? Oh, I do hope that when I'm remembered, it's not just the sick times. My dad died of cancer when i was 31 and I had two little kids and he didn't want to see them towards the end because he was getting so grumpy.

And now I appreciate that at first I was pretty mad like, well, they want see you. They want say goodbye. He's like no, no. because he was in a lot of pain, not having a good experience.

But I'm going to try, as it gets to the end, to do the things that are going make me happy or comfortable or whatever until the ends. And I am not going just try not to be that.

cancer person that is just miserable and drags on forever and ever in their misery. If you're still alive, there's reason to be happy. And I don't know, I just can't see it for me.

Maybe I'm delusional, but it helps. Every day it just helps to think, either way you are going to okay if I die. I know I have faith I'm going to be okay and everything is going be OK for me and for my family.

This is God's plan. What can I say? Liz, that's one thing to have. that level of faith and talk about it. But it's another thing to be able to say, I find personal peace even amid one of life's greatest trials, and to just say my faith doesn't just stop at a theoretical sense.

I'll abide in that even when it is the hardest times. And you know, this isn't necessarily a religious discussion, but I think most people have some sort of a faith construct.

Living with that helps you to understand that you're part of something bigger than yourself. And I really appreciate your perspective and I honor the experience.

I wanted to ask you, it's kind of a similar question that I asked earlier. If someone was facing the time when they were told they had an expiration date, what would you tell them to do?

If, you know, they're beginning of that and the doctor says, Hey, we think you've got X number of months to live. What would your counsel someone to if they find themselves in that situation?

I would counsel them to share that information with their loved ones, especially their family, and reach out and

forgive so that you don't have any negative feelings about anyone in your family or past friends.

And then decide together how you want the last days to go. What do we want to do for these months or years that we have left? I just think sharing, like not giving it to yourself.

Like I know so many people right now who are ill and I didn't know it. I called them for one reason and they blew me out of the water with their health story.

Why haven't you told anyone? We want to help. In any way we can, even if that's just sending good vibes or prayers or whatever. So I would say first thing is share when you can.

And then make some plans. Have something on your calendar. I remember that from COVID.

Faith, Legacy, and Closing Thoughts

The calendars went blank. That was so depressing. You just want something to look forward to. Personally, I always have a trip to Switzerland planned.

That just helps me get through the next phase. I don't know, you just have to have something to look forward to. And everyone does. Everyone can have Something.

Wow. Liz, thank you. You've shared with us something that is just, I know it's so deeply personal to you and you've share your journey. And I now you have been just in our circle of friends, you been so public and so positive even though something is so difficult as that.

I knows it is a hard discussion to have in some ways, but on the other hand, we're all going to die someday. And it's actually helpful to kind of talk about it in a way that's practical and say, well, let's live life to the meaning we can achieve.

Let's leave a legacy and let us live with hope and live faith. Don't die and don't end life with bitterness and frustration, but instead choose the path of peace.

Choose the Path of Hope. Anyway, I just thank you so much for sharing. I really appreciate it. Thank you. Thanks for giving me the opportunity. Well, Liz, are there any other tidbits of wisdom that you would share with anybody else, maybe family members or individuals who are dealing with a cancer diagnosis?

You know what? It's not just cancer, it's aging. Like you said, we are all going to die someday. And if you are a person of faith, then you know, what that means.

It is not a negative thing. it is just a thing, part of the process. I don't know how to describe it, but you just carry on and be grateful for what you have.

And even though I have cancer, I also have the best husband and the most little girls and now best grandkids. I'm probably not going to be able to enjoy them for very long, but I will from the other side.

It's all positive. Well, Liz, thank you. I have gained from your perspective, and I know one of the things I've taken away from this experience, or still think about, is no matter how it shakes out, you're only given a few decades on this planet, no mater how good it is.

And really, when a person, even if they have eight decades or more on the planet It's still just really a small amount of time. So it's our opportunity and our stewardship to try to leave it a little bit better than we found it, leave a legacy for people that we come across.

And like we talked earlier, find forgiveness. Let people be human and give them a chance to change and grow. Don't let people take advantage of you, of course, but there's real power in kind of gaining that perspective of what

really matters.

You have shared that with us and taught us, and so I really want to thank you. Well, thank Liz, thanks for taking the time to do this and I will put this out on a podcast and then I'll put your information on there.

I really appreciate you taking time. Hope you have a wonderful evening and keep in touch, Liz. Thank you so much, Peter. Okay. Thanks for tuning into the Doctors Making a Difference podcast.

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