

## KIM'S STORY



My thyroid journey began in 1981 at the age of 15 when my mother noticed a lump on my collarbone. A referral to Kingston and subsequent biopsy revealed I had thyroid cancer and I was told by the attending General Surgeon they needed to remove it. Those early days were a blur, and without the Internet or Google, I turned to our Encyclopedia Britannica to see what a thyroid was as I'd never heard of one before.

My surgery was very invasive, and included the removal of my thyroid, parathyroid and a number of lymph nodes. It left me with palsy of the tongue and a paralyzed vocal chord, and was, understandably a traumatic experience for me. Although cushioned by the love and support of family and friends, it also instilled in me the fear that I might die. Unaware of any support systems I could access, I kept those fears to myself, afraid to upset my family by talking about it. In the ensuing years, I discovered information about my cancer and was reassured to learn that my type (mixed pap/fol) was highly treatable. But, I was determined to make sure no one else experienced the fear I had as a young person with cancer. So, upon moving to Kingston at age 21, I joined the Canadian Cancer Society and soon became a Peer Support volunteer. I then joined the Thyroid Foundation of Canada in the early 90's and had the great honour and privilege of knowing TFC founder Diana Abramsky, enjoying a kinship with her want to help others.

Just as I started to relax about my mortality, in 1995, I learned the cancer had spread to both my lungs. It was only then that an Endocrinologist and Oncologist became part of my health care team. I had only been followed by the General Surgeon previously. By now, I had a lot of questions, and was not afraid to speak up. I wondered why I was not given a precautionary dose of Radioactive Iodine following my initial surgery, as I had since learned this was a common practice. I was also angry that my previous Doctor did not treat me with RAI following a nuclear medicine scan from 1986 that showed those same spots in my lungs, only smaller.

Now, under the care of an Endocrinologist, I went on to have 3 RAI treatments, each consisting of a 4 day stay in hospital, in isolation, over the next 5 years. I had to put my body into a state of hypothyroidism (referred to as

Hypo Hell in a thyroid cancer chat room), stopping my medication 4 weeks prior to treatment. I had read that sucking on lemon drops and drinking water would help reduce swelling of the parotid glands but despite doing this, mine became very inflamed and sore during, and after, treatment. Before I was discharged, the Nuclear Medical Department brought in a Geiger counter to make sure it was safe for me to leave. It was all very sci-fi! The treatments ablated the tumors, but left me with severe fibrosis of the lungs and a damaged left side parotid gland.

Despite these and other health challenges, I enjoy a full and rich life. I have travelled extensively, have a lengthy Public Service career, married and had a daughter, Grace, in 1997. I still grapple with symptoms of my disease, often feeling overwhelmingly tired, cranky or blue, but no longer live in fear. Finding my solace came from being able to help others while advocating for my own health care.

I see my Endocrinologist every 6 months at which time my bloodwork is completed. I am considered in remission as I have a detectable thyroglobulin (cancer marker) and my Doctor keeps my TSH very suppressed to lessen the chance of any activity.

My journey has not been easy but has provided a wonderful filter to the world including the importance of putting one's own misery aside to help others. Joining TFC has introduced me to many wonderful people, including fellow Board Members, volunteers and patients who contact us for information.



Kim and mom, Jean

Kim McNally,  
Vice-President