Patricia O’Connell

H.O.W Luncheon 2018

Thank you for the kind introduction. It is both an honor and a privilege to be here with you today. I just ran into our chairwoman, Valerie Goldfein, and she welcomed me into the “survivors club”, I told her; “it was one heck of an initiation, but I am most certainly grateful to join”.

To be honest, I’ve struggled with how exactly I wanted to use my 5-7 minutes of your time. I’m still in disbelief I’m here, I never expected to be on this side of the microphone at 33 years old. I’m a millennial for god sake’s nothing bad was ever supposed to happen to me. I want to take this few minutes of your time, to talk about how my generation of women might be missing the mark on listening to their bodies for signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer. How my life was impacted by my diagnosis, most especially as a millennial Mom to three young children.

In a world where information about everything is at our fingertips, it seems everything has been elevated to the status of “this matters.” So, from laundry to food to sunscreen to screen time to simplified home decor, nothing is “no big deal” to the millennial mom. And because we also are also human, it becomes impossible to ride every hobbyhorse at the same time, which leaves us exhausted, burnt out, and often feeling very guilty. I am connected, yet dissatisfied. We tend to portray something we don’t have and long for the very thing we project. Every Facebook like and Instagram heart simply scratches an itch, leaving us satisfied for a moment. Our motto could easily be “The grass is always greener on the other side of the filter”. We make our grass as green as possible via those perfect Instagram filters — it’s our way of quieting the inner suspicion that our lives fall horribly short of everyone else’s. Guilt and the millennial mom are like peanut butter and jelly. They just seem to go together. You know it’s true because if you’re a millennial mom who just heard “peanut butter and jelly,” you likely just felt a stab of guilt that you fed that to your kid too many times last week. I admit, I find myself riding the line of confidence and guilt quite often. Millennial moms are constantly wondering whether they are doing the right thing. It’s like we’ve lost our compass and can’t find north, so we get on social media or Google to try and figure out if other people are feeding their kids PB&J three times a week and if there are any studies that tell us what damage it causes. Over the last year, I’ve realized this fine line between confidence and guilt was a major inhibition to finding of an accurate diagnosis.

You see, it isn’t that I didn’t have symptoms, it’s that I simply didn’t have time to acknowledge them. I was exhausting myself attempting to make everything picture perfect, when in all reality, I would have only benefited from looking at the cold hard truth. For three years, I suffered with painful periods, irregular cramping, indigestion and back pain. There was a handful of times within this time I was desperate enough to seek an urgent care visit, or go see my nurse practioner but each time I was sent away with a clean bill of health and more of that millennial mom “guilt” for having spent any time away from my husband and children. The symptoms I continued to have only increased the feelings of insanity. It wasn’t until I gained enough confidence in my intuition to demand answers that I was hit with the “mack truck” collision that occurs when you receive the news that you have cancer, it brings your life and your plans to a screeching halt. I remember it like it was yesterday, it was March 3rd of last year, it had been 3 weeks since my right ovary was removed along with the 15cm tumor, the one that had ruptured and spilled throughout my abdomen. The nurse called my cell phone around 10am, and ask I come in to talk with the doctor. I was at the gym at the time, still battling the mommy guilt of having my 3, 4 and 5-year-old in the gym daycare for an hour while I worked out. I told the nurse I had my children with me, she told me it wasn’t a choice, I needed to get to the office even if that meant bringing the toddlers in tow. So, I fled to the doctor’s office in anticipation of what she could possibly have to tell me. I waited in the waiting room for over an hour, I was annoyed….my children needed me, the last-minute babysitter was going to cost a fortune, naptimes were going to be off and thinking how on earth I was going to have time to get treatment in the event something was wrong. I realized I was the last patient left in the office when the nurse brought me back, my doctor already in the room crying, I consoled her as she told me I had cancer, “its bad” she said. We didn’t have a stage, but we knew the grade and it wasn’t good. It all ran together as she mentioned the multiple surgeries, several rounds of chemo, guaranteed hair-loss and fighting for my life. It was in this moment I realized that the mirage of my life only mattered if I was here to continue living it.

Throughout the last year, I’ve had two major operations, lost my ovaries, my uterus, most of my abdominal tissue, the lymph nodes in my lower half and completed several rounds of platinum based chemotherapy. I’ve known what it’s like to be sicker than I ever thought possible; to be so fatigued that I couldn’t sit up, to spend hours vomiting on the bathroom floor, to feel so alone in a room full of family and friends, but on the other side of all that is beautiful faces of my three children as they kiss my bald head, my husband holding my hand looking in my eyes and promising he’d never give up, the talks about heaven, God, and yucky chemo. You see, the teachable moments, the learning, the growth, none of it could have been possible without my struggle. One moment I think back to often is when my eldest daughter Jane came in my room to say goodnight. It was after my 3rd round, which seemed to be a particularly difficult one for me both physically and emotionally. She came in my room and over to my bedside and said, “mommy, who am I going to call mommy if you have to go to heaven.” I held back my tears while I explained to her that Mommy was going to be just fine, but that she was so blessed to have so many people in her life that loved her.

I’ve been blessed with the opportunity to know the kindness of hospital workers and friends, through Jen and the HOW organization I have felt part of a community of people. The financial support provided me with the ability to take care of myself for a change, to see the importance of listening and taking action. To me, cancer survivorship is not about getting through without dying. It has become about living through treatment and then finding a way to integrate the lessons learned back into my life. It has been a continuum of making the women of my generation more aware of the facts and realities of life, rather than those edited with the best filter.

Thank you doesn’t begin to cover my appreciation for this organization and your continued support it provides our community. Please leave here today knowing that your contribution, no matter how big or small, has made an impact and saved a life.