



LUNG CANCER—COMING SOON TO A NON-SMOKER NEAR YOU

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So what if lung cancer is the #1 cancer killer in the world? I won't get it. I've never smoked a cigarette in my life.

Neither had Dana Reeve, Christopher Reeve's wife, who announced she had been diagnosed with lung cancer less than a year after his death and then died a mere seven months later.

But let's not focus on Dana Reeve... a young mother who died in the prime of her life from a cancer that doesn't seem "fair" given that she never smoked. That's too sad. Too tragic.

Let's put the focus back on the smokers. Yeah! Lung cancer is their problem, not ours!

UNLESS...

Did you or anyone you care about ever smoke in the past, but quit?

I'm not talking "quit" as in quit two weeks ago. I'm talking "quit" as in two years ago. Or five years ago. Or ten years ago. Or even forty years ago.

Oh, stop bothering me already! Lungs go back to normal ten years after quitting. Anyone who quit that long ago is no more likely to get lung cancer than a non-smoker! Right?

WRONG.

This is the lesson I learned the hard way...

...on February 20, 2007 when my beautiful, perfectly healthy 64-year-old mom was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer.

What? That's impossible! She quit smoking 40 years ago.

But it's not impossible. And this is the reality I've been struggling to come to terms with for the past 18 months as I battle side-by-side with my mom... to live.

Sixty-five percent of the people diagnosed with lung cancer today are never-smokers (like Dana Reeve) and former smokers (many who – like my beautiful mom – quit smoking decades ago).

Yes, 65%. The majority.

And this number – 65% – leads me to the most heart-breaking part of my story.

It sounds sick and twisted... but I find myself thinking: “Why couldn't Mom have gotten breast cancer?!” Or “If only she'd gotten colon cancer!” Why do I say this? Because in traveling on this cancer journey with my mom – in trying to help her find hope in her treatment and prognosis, I've been confronted with a harsh reality:

The survival rates for lung cancer remain low because we as a society don't care about lung cancer. And since we don't care, we don't fight for a cure.

We don't fight for people like my mom, or people like Dana Reeve. Because lung cancer doesn't elicit sympathy; it elicits blame. “They smoked; they refused to stop; they did it to themselves.” But what about the 65% of lung cancer patients who never smoked or who kicked the habit? We continue to ignore this majority. And I don't understand why.

I don't understand why, despite being the #1 cancer killer in the world, lung cancer is consistently left at the bottom of the list when it comes to cancer research funding.

Want to know what else I learned the hard way? Lung cancer kills more people every year than breast, colon, prostate, liver, kidney and melanoma cancers... combined. Most people don't know this. I certainly didn't... until lung cancer crashed into my life with my mom. Now I know that lung cancer kills 3 times as many men as prostate cancer and nearly twice as many women as breast cancer. Now I look at my beautiful mom and I feel betrayed. Why aren't we aware of this? Why aren't we *doing* something about it?

As I stand by Mom's side through her ongoing chemo regimens, I have “cancer envy.” Wow, breast cancer's 5-year survival rate (technically the “cure rate”) is 87%! And for prostate cancer, it's 99%!

But Mom and I don't get a shot at those odds, because lung cancer's 5-year survival rate lags behind in the scientific “Dark Ages” at only 15%. And when I see that we spend 20 times more federal dollars on breast cancer research and 10 times more on prostate cancer than on lung cancer – I can't help but conclude that Mom is paying the price. That she and my family are faced with these grim odds simply because we as a society don't demand action – because we judge her cancer as less “virtuous.”

Why?

Even now, over 35 years after President Nixon declared the “War on Cancer,” most lung cancer patients still die within months of diagnosis. Nothing has changed. There's no sense of urgency. No cures.

Again, I find myself thinking – Why did Mom have to get the one cancer that no one gives a damn about? If she was battling a cancer that had received more research funding over the past three decades, maybe today we'd be rejoicing in her remission, instead of living life in 3-month increments... from scan to scan... hoping against the odds that the next scan isn't going to bring bad news.

But dwelling on what “is” versus what I “want it to be” serves no purpose at this point. At this point, as Mom says with her indomitable spirit, “We're in the soup!”

So how can I improve the “soup”? What can I do to help change the public perception of lung cancer so that there's more hope for those who have to battle it? I feel the best hope for change is to try to break through the stigma that's attached to lung cancer.

My one request from anyone who's reading this? Spread the word that lung cancer isn't “for smokers only.”

Think about Dana Reeve, who never smoked a day in her life. Think about my wonderful mom, who quit smoking over 40 years ago, when it was finally being made clear that smoking was dangerous. Think about all your friends and loved ones who have successfully kicked the habit.

If the “smoking” part of lung cancer is what makes you apathetic, think about the 65% majority of lung cancer patients who never smoked or who quit smoking years and sometimes even decades ago. Have they not proven that they chose life over smoking? Don't they deserve hope?

I feel they do. I feel WE DO. Because, speaking as a never-smoker, who's to say you or me won't be the next Dana Reeve? And if you or me are the next Dana Reeve... do we really want to walk into an oncologist's office and be told (like Mom was told in March 2007) that we only have 12-14 months to live because lung cancer still doesn't have very effective treatments?

I believe in my heart that if we put more research dollars into lung cancer, we'd see the results in the survival rates. But first we have to care. First we have to stop dumping lung cancer into the “You get it because you won't stop smoking” category.

Let me be clear – I'm not saying that current smokers don't deserve hope or that they “deserve” lung cancer. But if we're going to be blunt about it, the reason lung cancer doesn't get attention is because of its stigma as a “smokers only” cancer.

Please help erase that stigma and STAND UP TO LUNG CANCER by going to www.lungcanceralliance.org

Help me make a difference. For Dana. For my mom. And for you, me, and all the people we love who might fight this battle in the days and years to come.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Here's to climbing mountains. And to moving them!

Jamie Gorenberg currently writes for "Desperate Housewives" and expends the rest of her energy attempting other desperate acts – such as trying not to be a neurotic wife to her incredibly patient husband. Her beautiful mom, Caren, quit smoking over 40 years ago and was recently diagnosed with lung cancer.