

Esther Harris – Survivor Story



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Forward by Janine Giese-Davis, Ph.D.

Not only do we have a video on our website of Esther telling her wonderful story of outliving by many years her doctor's prognosis for you to enjoy, but we also have her written story for those of you who prefer to read or do not have access to a computer where you can watch the video. You can see from her written story how much Esther loves to write, and the skill with which this lifelong habit has helped her to cope with her cancer journey. She enlightens us with her successful ability to use humour and for her ability to allow us as readers a window into her days. This description is so valuable for those survivors who are searching for ways to combat loneliness, or frightened to move to seniors' housing. She seems to embody an ability to "reframe" what might be difficult, sad, or frightening into opportunities for her to use her skills, enjoy her talents, and to remain very social. She even enjoys teasing the reader a bit with her descriptions of her "face lifts."

Thank you Esther, for helping us all to learn a little bit better how to use this "reframing" coping skill, and for pointing us to a creative group in Calgary that many others could enjoy. Studies show that people who can see opportunities in crisis, or shift their perspective slightly like Esther does, are often less depressed in the face of difficulty. Studies also show that learning to experience the sad times (rather than run from them) as well as reach for the happy times also can lead to lower depression, as Esther talks about doing in her video. *To Watch Esthers Video click here:* www.cancerbridges.ca/resources/survivor-story-videos

Esther, You're Looking Very Well – by Esther Harris

In 2004, two weeks after my 77th birthday, I left B.C. and moved to Calgary to be near my family. I had been told a few months earlier that I had Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma and furthermore, the specialist continued, drugs would not be helpful at my age since they would probably kill me. However, here I am in 2012 at 86 still alive and enjoying my life, thanks in large measure to all the wonderful people at Tom Baker Cancer Clinic whose oversight over the years since I arrived in Calgary has kept me going through three chemotherapy treatments for the Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, surgery for colon cancer in 2008, and two courses of radiation treatments of head, face and neck for squamous cell cancers from November, 2011 to the end of March, 2012.

Life-changing experiences? Well, yes.

Last summer I read Lewis Wolpert's newly published book: "You're Looking Very Well: The Surprising Nature of Getting Old" (Faber & Faber, 2011). He is a British retired medical biologist and also in his eighties. I, too, have been constantly surprised at my own ageing and its goings-on amid the various demands this stage of my life has made, and keeps on making, on my physical, intellectual and emotional strengths in the process. It was inevitable that the fact of getting old, together with my cancer experiences, would change my outlook on life. So, despite the dire early prognosis that I would not live beyond 77, I am inclined to agree with Wolpert when he urges: 'Please keep remembering that research world-wide has shown that we are least happy in our mid-forties and happiest in our late-seventies, and even older.'

In recent years I have learned not to look ahead in the ways I did all of my life: plan to get this degree, plan to get that degree, take this course, take that course, write this piece or write a piece of poetry, travel here or travel there. Of course, I was lucky then to have the energy to carry out all my plans. Now I do not. The combination of old age and cancers have forced life changes which nevertheless I still find satisfying.

I love being close to family in Calgary and the fact that I am sharing life with them and not my imminent death as I thought when I first decided to move here. I live on my own, self-sufficiently, in a seniors' condominium where, if I wish, there are plenty of opportunities to interact with others of my own age: to play cards with them for example in our games-room where we also have a large billiard table for those interested. Happy-hours are regular three times a week get-togethers and coffee get-togethers are held each weekday morning downstairs in our spacious lobby area. There is a film-night once a week and frequent large buffets put on in our communal dining-room to which our families and friends can be invited. And there is always the chance of a good gossip round the mail boxes each day.

Old age and cancer treatments and their accompanying stretches of tiredness can often lead to isolation. However, my lifelong habits of reading and writing have stood me in good stead because each of those pursuits require my being alone and losing myself and any thoughts of old age or cancer sometimes for hours at a time. When I am reading or writing I do not fall asleep; not as I do frequently when I watch television, even when there is a programme on that I enjoy such as "Jeopardy" or good drama on PBS or political commentary on BBC World Service.

In recent years I have become a member of the Creative Aging Society Calgary whose aim is to foster connections between older adults, artists, professionals and interested community members. They encourage submissions for publication in their Newsletter and participation in their programs at various senior community centres. As they point out, we don't have to be a Picasso or a Shakespeare to paint or write our stories. Of course, one of the mainstays in coping with a lot of things is humour which is often expressed when people get together for whatever reason. When I go downstairs to the lobby sometimes where a lot of my neighbours have gathered to drink morning coffee and to chat, some of them will say to me: Esther, you're looking very well. I simply point out to them that this is in part due to the surgeons who have removed cancers from my face and who have, in the stitching process afterwards, "lifted" certain areas of my face so that I now have a smooth brow with no wrinkles and no crowsfeet round my eyes. Another benefit resulting from coping with cancer in old age. Who knew?

To read more of Esthers writing and to join in on some creative activities around calgary please visit: www.creativeagingcalgary.ca