

## Dancing Through Survival - Sheila's Journey Toward Surviving Breast Cancer

By Coral Paul

**B**reast cancer is something many hear about but never expect to face themselves. It's one of those things you think happens to other people – until life shows you it can happen to anyone. For Sheila Nevin, that moment came in July 2010. She was at home changing out of her work clothes when she felt something unusual – a lump near her armpit.

The next day, she reached out to a family member because she remembered a time years earlier when they had said they found a lump too. Talking with them gave Sheila the courage to make an appointment with her doctor to get it checked out. After an ultrasound and a biopsy – a test where doctors take a small sample of tissue to see if has cancer cells – Sheila waited for the results.

In October 2010, Sheila returned to her doctor's office. She remembers that day clearly: the doctor had called in all the other patients first, almost like clearing the room so Sheila could hear the news privately. When the doctor finally came out carrying a stack of books in a plastic bag, Sheila says she knew immediately what it meant. When the doctor confirmed she had breast cancer, she didn't cry. The news didn't fully hit until she was driving home. Crossing the bridge in Sipekne'katik, the weight of the diagnosis hit, and she broke down in tears.

Once home, Sheila told her brother, and then she went to see her mom. "I have breast cancer," she said. "Don't worry, I'm going to be okay." Her mother encouraged her to get a mastectomy, but when Sheila met with her surgeon, she decided on a lumpectomy – a surgery that removes the tumour and a small amount of the surrounding tissue. For Sheila, this choice was more than medicine: breasts are part of being a woman, and she wanted to preserve that sense of herself.

Just before her surgery, on November 13, a new baby arrived in Sheila's family, which brought hope and distraction during a difficult time. Six days later, on November 19, Sheila had her surgery. Afterward, she went home and crawled into bed beside her mom – her "safe space." While recovering, she made visits to see the baby and eventually spent time caring for the baby at home. Physically, Sheila couldn't do much, and says her husband took care of almost everything – a support she is deeply grateful for. Still, she feels she was meant to care for the baby during that time. The baby became a bright light during a dark period, teaching Sheila about the strength she had inside and bringing her comfort and motivation to beat cancer. In turn, Sheila was open with the child about cancer, helping the little one understand and learn about it from an early age. "She knew about cancer since she was a baby," Sheila says.



Sheila then went through chemotherapy and radiation. Losing her hair was one of the hardest parts of her journey. "As a First Nations person, my hair is my strength," she says. When she saw it falling out in the shower, she called her sister who is a hairdresser, and together they shaved her head. After chemo, she waited two months before starting radiation. Following treatment, she was prescribed Tamoxifen, a medication to help treat breast cancer. While on it, she experienced breast inflammation and flu-like symptoms. Doctors were unable to pinpoint the exact cause of this, but she emphasizes that medications like this can help and it's important to know that side effects are not the same for everyone.

Three years ago, at age 60, Sheila went for her routine mammogram at the hospital. Because of her medical

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## Dancing Through Survival... continued



history, she couldn't use the mobile screening bus, which meant returning to the same hospital where her journey began. Her doctor later called to say they had found another mass in her other breast. This time, she didn't hesitate. "Might as well take both," she said, choosing a double mastectomy – a surgical procedure to remove both breasts.

After her second diagnosis, Sheila made a promise to herself to focus

on her health — body, mind and spirit. She began dancing, borrowing her niece's regalia to start, and later making her own with her daughter. Connecting with her culture though dancing was central to her healing—physically, emotionally and spiritually. Sharing her story has also been healing, giving her purpose and helping others. Sheila states that her doctor never said she was "cancer-free." Doctors often cannot guarantee this because cancer may return in breast tissue, nearby lymph nodes (small glands that help the body fight infection) or chest wall tissues. While her chance is low – less than 5% - it is not zero. Sheila wants people to be aware of this, and she also wants to remind people that men can get breast cancer too. So, everyone – regardless of your age, gender or race – [should be aware of the signs.](#)

Through it all, Sheila emphasizes living fully and keeping a positive mindset. "When I was first diagnosed, I didn't think of myself as sick. I kept working and staying active. Physically, I was sick, but I had to keep my mind and

spirit happy. If you can, continue to live your life," she says.

One quote she lived by during this time was: "The choices you make dictate the life you lead."

Today, Sheila continues to share her story in the hope that it might help others. "Whether people know it or not, telling our stories is healing," she says. "And if my story helps even one person get checked, it's worth sharing."

**Wela'liek Sheila:** The Tajikeimik team sincerely thanks Sheila for sharing her story with us. Sheila, we recognize the courage it took to revisit such a personal and challenging journey, and we admire the strength and resilience you have shown. And to anyone living with cancer, we hope Sheila's story inspires you to take things one day at a time and reminds you that you are not alone.

## Check Out Our Website!

For more information on Tajikeimik's Mi'kmaq Cancer Care Program, or to access our resources, visit:

[www.mhwns.ca/programs/mikmaq-cancer-care](http://www.mhwns.ca/programs/mikmaq-cancer-care)

### About Us

Tajikeimik is the new and developing health and wellness organization that is leading health transformation on behalf of Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia. In collaboration with Chiefs, Grand Council, and Health Directors, Tajikeimik will build on and evolve the health and wellness services and programs used by Mi'kmaq people in Nova Scotia; improve health service delivery; and strengthen coordination with Federal and Provincial health system partners - with the goal of improving overall health for Mi'kmaq and communities.

Elukuti'kw wjit naji-wlo'ltinenew utanminal. (We are working toward better health for all in our communities.)

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