

Dealing with an Illness During a Time of Crisis

An interview by Tessa Murphy

The Corona Virus pandemic has invaded our world and changed lives forever. It has disrupted the daily lives of individuals, resulting in the loss of jobs, loved ones, and proper human connection. Although one might understand how the pandemic has influenced their life, it is important to take a dive into other's experiences during this difficult time. In this interview I have conducted with my grandmother, who I call Nanny, I was able to see how the Corona Virus pandemic influenced her life, as well as how her recent diagnosis of cancer has taken part in this. It is unbelievable how countless people are suffering from an illness in addition to living during a time of a pandemic, which is why I wanted to understand her point of view on the situation and observe how her hope and determination rises above all else.

Tessa: Nanny, How are you today? What is your daily routine like now? What do you do in your pastime?

Nanny: Actually, I feel very well today. I do light housework to start my day. I still can't vacuum and you know mop floors and things like that but I do bathrooms and bedrooms. I do my dishes and wash my clothes. I try to keep myself busy, many days I will take a nap in the afternoon for about an hour. If the weather is nice I sit out with some of my neighbors at night.

Tessa: Do you watch television or read books, since I know you would like to do that as a hobby prior to the pandemic?

Nanny: I watch tv, and I have read a book or two.

Tessa: What about the news? I know that you are very avid on keeping up with today's news.

Nanny: Actually I have been watching less and less because I have not been happy with the news recently. I have realized that the news shows that I would watch around 10 at night were resulting in a poor night's sleep; I would get up every couple of hours. Recently, I have stopped watching the news and I have been sleeping soundly throughout the night. So I chose to not watch anything like that and just watch a sitcom instead. At least I am not going to bed thinking of these horrible things I see. Especially in my current situation, it would just drive me crazy having to look at the state our country is in.

Tessa: Have you gotten into any new hobbies recently like others have during this pandemic?

Nanny: I talk on the phone and I have a lot of friends and family that keep in touch regularly. I have people send me adult coloring books and pens. To be quite honest, they are in a drawer. Don't get me wrong, there are times when I get down too. It is not a happy time. Even though I have lived on my own for 17 years, I had the ability to get in my car and go wherever I wanted to go. I don't have that privilege anymore and that is truly upsetting. And I have been trying to

regulate my medications and shrink these tumors, which so far I have not had any success with yet. I am hoping with this new treatment I'm on, they will finally find what will help me.

Tessa: Do you remember what life was like before the pandemic, maybe back in January February?

Nanny: I was a very happy person back then, undoubtedly more happy than I am now. There is no comparison to what it is now. Of course I have learned to deal with this pandemic, we all have, since it has been going on for 8 months. But to a certain degree, I still feel confined because I haven't been in a store other than my pharmacy or to a doctor's office, and that's pretty limited. Before that, I would have been able to go wherever I wanted to go.

Tessa: Could you give me your daily routine before the Corona Virus pandemic to compare to now?

Nanny: I would get up in the morning, get my shower, and take care of the house. Actually, I had a cleaning lady who is my best friend and cleaned for me for over 20 years. Because of finances I had to stop that and that upset me. Not because of the cleaning, but because I would not be able to see her as much. It gave me an opportunity because we live 45 minutes apart now, so it guaranteed I would see her every other week. I used to go out to lunch with friends or family anytime and even spontaneously. I enjoyed shopping, which I haven't been in a clothes or shoes store since February. I was pretty much settled in the way my life was going and I was content with it. I chose not to date because I didn't want to, not because there were opportunities, but it just wasn't what I wanted to do. My life was very busy anyway and I enjoyed that, especially your company. I never minded when someone called me and said could you pick one of the kids up, I actually looked forward to picking you up from Rowan to grab a bite to eat or meet you on campus. It gave me an opportunity to spend more time with my grandkids, and I was extremely happy, until this pandemic happened. It shut me down. Emotionally, I had already found out that I had cancer for 8 months before the pandemic, that was the first shut down having to adjust to that. On top of that the pandemic came and shut me down in my house. It took whatever I had before away. So there have been many days of loneliness, but every body goes through it. You just have to get it in your mind that you are not the only one and that there are millions of other people that are in the same position, and maybe even a worse position.

Tessa: Do you think that thinking about those other people going through this too gave you more perspective on your situation?

Nanny: Of course, imagine people that don't have friends or family that keep in touch. It would be pretty much unbearable for me if that were the case. So I have been spared that, thankfully.

Tessa: What is your current condition and what is your plan?

Nanny: I found out about my condition on June 3rd, 2019. I went to a dermatologist to have what I thought was a cyst on the top of my head removed. It turned out to be malignant and metastasized from somewhere else in my body. There was never any indication that I had anything wrong with me, other than diabetes which I have had for 14 years. Which I was controlling myself. I didn't have to take insulin and could control it with pills. Then the cancer started and I started going on treatments. I have two different types of cancer, one is a carcinoid and another one, which are small tumors, that total about 6 throughout my body. One on my lung, spine, a couple small ones on my brain. If the three in my brain don't shrink, I might have to have surgery on one of them. Right now we are trying to get the ones that are not carcinoid under control. That's what I am hoping. I started off with a shot that I would go to my oncologist for once a month to take care of the carcinoids. After 3 months and several tests, PET scans, MRI's, and biopsies, it wasn't helping. The medicine was shrinking them some, but not shrinking the large one in my lung.

Tessa: What would you say your emotional state was in that moment in time? You can give me a couple words or however much detail you would like.

Nanny: Easy, I can give you one word: devastated. It hit like a brick, I never knew. I couldn't believe it at first. It took a while to start understanding that this is what I have, even though I don't feel it and my doctor says I look great. She couldn't understand why I wasn't feeling worse. And that made it more annoying and frustrating.

Tessa: What was life like during the past month or two? What were you feeling? What were you thinking about starting chemo?

Nanny: When I started on chemo, that changed a lot of things. I had a lot of side effects. I dealt with them, but I had so many. I was tired, lethargic, couldn't lift anything anymore, and I wasn't cooking anymore. Though I could still keep up with my laundry and dishes, regular house work was very difficult to continue. Of course the losing of your hair is...I'm trying to even find a word for it. It's nothing like you would ever imagine, how it affects you. I was embarrassed and devastated. You just never think this stuff will happen to you until it does.

Tessa: So that was when your daily routine began to change?

Nanny: Yeah I was going downhill with the chemo. Thankfully, my doctor was very upfront with me, she's amazing. She is easy to talk to and you can ask her anything and she will be very honest with you. Going through the chemo itself wasn't that bad. I was going three times in a row and then I would get a shot in my arm. Then I would be off for three weeks and then go for another three days. After doing that for 3 months they took a PET scan, which showed it wasn't working.

Tessa: Were these treatments during the pandemic or before the pandemic?

Nanny: This was after COVID hit the United States.

Tessa: What was it like going to the hospital to get the shots? Did you have to go through any protocol when you entered the building due to the virus?

Nanny: As soon as everything started regulating with the pandemic, that was when you would have to wear a mask and have your temperature taken. Then I would be weighed, get my bloodwork, and get my chemo. No one could come in with me, I had to be let off at the front door.

Tessa: Did it upset you that no family members could sit in the chair next to you while you would get chemo for 3 or 4 hours?

Nanny: No, I was able to deal with it. Prior to that I was able to have your mom with me or you on a couple occasions, and I adjusted to being alone. It was easy, plus the fact that the whole office had to be changed. They had to put barriers up in between the patients who were getting chemo, and only 5 chairs in the room for distancing of 8 feet. Those were definite changes due to the pandemic.

Tessa: Were there any worries you might have had having to go to hospitals all the time during a pandemic? Did you ever worry you might get it yourself or that you didn't want to go?

Nanny: I had two surgeries in one week during March. One on my side for a tumor and another on my breast. I went to two different institutions, and I was fine with it. It didn't upset me that I had to go to a hospital. I just did it because I didn't have a choice. You have to do these things and you have to get it in your head that this is what you have to do and you are going to do it. I had your mom with me both times and we waited 5 hours for one surgery and 4 for the other surgery because there were only 2 OR's open and other complications. It was frustrating, but I didn't panic and I just waited. You have got to get it in your head that you have something wrong with you and you need to have them find out what it is and how you can be treated for it. Hopefully, the outcome is to be cured. Don't get me wrong there were days I felt sorry for myself, I'm not going to say there weren't. But you have to get through it. And my family helped me through that. I could call anyone at any time and they were all amazing to help me. I'm still dealing with it, I'm hoping that this pill that I am on will be the magic pill. Hopefully it will help with both the carcinoids and the other cancer. Now I am taking the original shot for the carcinoid with the new medicine for the other cancer. I only have to see my doctor once a month.

Tessa: How is to see family again and feel some sense of normalcy?

Nanny: Well I can tell you one thing, it was extremely difficult having to miss out on family occasions during this quarantine. I missed my family vacation this year, which was hard to do. I had to miss going to see my brother and my best friends which I would do on a daily basis. So, of course it is a blessing that I am able to social distance and see my loved ones, even if I have to wear an uncomfortable mask.

Tessa: Do you feel like you've accomplished more recently, and what would make life "good" for you? What do you care most about now?

Nanny: I'm feeling way better now than when I was on the chemo, and that's what gives me hope that this medicine will work for me. I have more energy, I am cooking again, and I don't feel like I'm depleted. Of course the best thing that could happen right now would be for me to get good news. That my treatment is starting to work and things are hopeful. If after three months I have another scan and it shows no difference, or that the tumors are larger, I don't know what I will think. I think it is going to hit hard because I feel better without the chemo and I have hope that the pills are going to work. If they don't, I have to try another treatment and then another one. Who knows what your body can take? Regardless, I am still hopeful and I say my prayers everyday for others as well as myself.

Tessa: Regarding our global pandemic, what are your hopes for the future?

Nanny: I am hoping they will find a vaccine for it, I truly am. I understand that it is hard to find vaccines for these kinds of things, but something has to change. We have been through these COVID's before and we have made it through without masks or being apart from family. I want to be able to be closer with my family again, be able to hug them. Even attending funerals, which I haven't been able to do for my close cousins who have passed away. Until this pandemic can be dealt with, things can not go back to normal. And I really want normal again. I am determined that I will get through this cancer and that we will get through this pandemic, and that is what I see for my future.

This image is my Nanny during her treatment of chemo, and also during the pandemic. She was able to see her family while social distancing outside, and while sporting her new wig due to the effects of chemo.

