

My name is Heather McKissock Plucinski. At first I was hesitant to write about my past illness because it is hard to be viewed as a "victim." My father was stationed at Camp Lejeune periodically through my childhood; one of these timeframes was during the period of water contamination at TIII and another during the 9 day period of contaminated water at Paradise Point.

We lived in Paradise Point in 1984 and 1985 and I was bussed to TIII Elementary School during these two years. What I recall are many very hot days with no air conditioning at the school. We all gulped the water from the fountains at every opportunity: between classes, during class, after recess or gym, and of course, every day during lunch in the school cafeteria. I also vividly remember almost daily headaches following the bus ride home from school, which I used to complain to my mother about regularly. I never went to see a doctor about them; they seemed to go away in the evening once I was back at home. I always attributed it to the bus ride itself.

In 2003 both my mother and I were diagnosed with breast cancer. I was 33 years old and my mother was 57. Following my diagnosis several of my military friends and family became aware of the contamination on Camp Lejeune and began independently contacting me to encourage me to gather more information. My mother's cancer was very aggressive and my doctors recommended an immediate mastectomy followed by chemotherapy. Both myself and everyone I knew were shocked at my diagnosis in particular. I'd always been very healthy, active in a variety of sports, and never been to the doctors for more than a mere cold. I'd always been healthy and never sick.

I had a mastectomy with 3 months of aggressive chemotherapy. I experienced the full spectrum of side effects related to chemotherapy-fatigue, baldness, nausea, weight gain etc. I went from never visiting the hospital to having a team of personal physicians overnight. Through the multiple surgeries and a variety of treatment regimes I continued to work full time and was raising a 2 year old with my husband. My diagnosis was an extreme surprise to me, particularly considering my age. This was made more apparent by being the youngest in the chemotherapy treatment room. My doctor recommended that genetic testing be performed following my treatment. It was determined by a lab in Chapel Hill, NC that even though my mother and I both were diagnosed with cancer in the same year that I was not genetically predisposed for breast cancer. Learning this did not give me any relief because there was still no answer to the puzzle. I just decided there was no rhyme or reason, continuing on with the process of healing.

Learning of the contamination on Camp Lejeune did catch my attention. Knowing that this could be the origin may be the answer to my questions that have plagued me: what caused my cancer? And why did I get it so young?

I have been very fortunate following my treatment that began in 2003. I have had healthy check-ups, I have had a second child and have had many reconstructive surgeries in an attempt to get "back to normal." I am happy to say that I have just now reached the benchmark of being 5 years free of cancer. Thankfully, my mother is also 5 ½ years clean of the disease. It is my hope that more information is provided about the contamination that occurred on Camp Lejeune. I'd also like more people that have been exposed step forward so that those responsible can be brought to justice and be made aware of how they have damaged so many lives.

Heather Plucinski