

A Firefighter's Biggest Fight



Cindy and Bill Atkins

“I was diagnosed with breast cancer on February 6, 2008 – my sister’s birthday,” explains Cindy Atkins. “I had a mammogram less than a year before in January 2007, and it came back clean. But in May 2007, I felt a lump in my breast. My gynecologist ordered an ultrasound, but nothing was found. We thought the lump might be a cyst. I went back in a month for another ultrasound, but the results were inconclusive. In six months, I went back again for an ultrasound. This time, they found the cancer.”

Atkins first sought treatment with a general surgeon. “He seemed very nonchalant and never even examined me,” said Atkins. A friend urged her to get a second opinion at a cancer center, so she went to the Duke Comprehensive Cancer Center, where she met breast oncologist Dr. Getchen Kimmick. “In my first visit, Dr. Kimmick checked me thoroughly and found swelling under my breast,” said Atkins.

Later, tests revealed that the cancer was in her liver. She was diagnosed with invasive neocarsimona, a fast growing cancer, and was put on chemotherapy immediately. Today, Atkins receives chemotherapy once a week as part of her ongoing treatment.

“My cancer diagnosis has also been difficult,” said Atkins. Early on, Dr. Kimmick asked if the couple wanted to be a part of Pathfinders psycho-social model of whole person care and told them about a Pathfinders support group for women with metastatic breast cancer and their spouses.

“The support group helped us know what to expect, and we like to know what to expect,” said Atkins. “When you find out you have breast cancer, everyone comes out of the woodwork. But they didn’t have what I had — a stage IV diagnosis. The women in my support group are much like me.”

Since her diagnosis, Atkins can no longer work as a firefighter because of policies and guidelines involving her

health. For Atkins, the idea that she could no longer be a firefighter was perhaps more devastating to her than the news that she had cancer.

“I was a stay-at-home mom until I was 38 years old,” explained Atkins. “In 1997, my children were in school and didn’t need me as much, so I decided I needed to do something for me. I went to firefighter school – 20 weeks of rigorous training. It was tough, but one of the proudest days of my life was the

day I got my firefighter’s badge.” Atkins and her husband, Bill, began meeting and talking with Tina to work through their feelings of fear and loss. “I worked with Tina, and she helped me realize that a lot about fighting cancer is like going through the fire academy.”

Atkins realized that she had to use that same kind of determination she had used to become a firefighter to stay positive and determined during her fight with cancer.

“I didn’t think I needed help, but Pathfinders helped me stay positive during a very difficult time,” Atkins said. “For me, I accepted what has happened. I didn’t go through grieving and anger. This is what I have. I am going to fight it. There is purpose in all this. Firefighting was one chapter in my life. Now, there is a new chapter.”

Part of that new chapter included finding something that gave her the same kind of purpose as firefighting – helping others. “I am thinking of volunteering,” Atkins said. “I have stayed very positive. I have used a lot of the wonderful resources that Tina has given to me to feel good about me. Yes, I’m bald with no eyebrows and no eye lashes, but that’s just on the outside. I am the same person on the inside.

“I have a blonde wig, but I am not blonde,” said Atkins with a laugh. “Who knows? This may be part of this new chapter in my life. God has been good to me. You think you appreciate life before, but you really don’t until this happens. I have a lot to live for. There is a lot to keep me going. I have a future, and I plan on living it.”