

Saved by the CANCER LADIES' RUNNING CLUB

When author Josie Lloyd was going through dark times, it was the friendship of a gutsy group of women that got her back on her feet

It was April 2018 and I was in the middle of running the Brighton Marathon 10K. My bald head was glistening with sweat, as I breathlessly cursed my stupidity. I was in the middle of cancer treatment. Why was I putting myself through this?

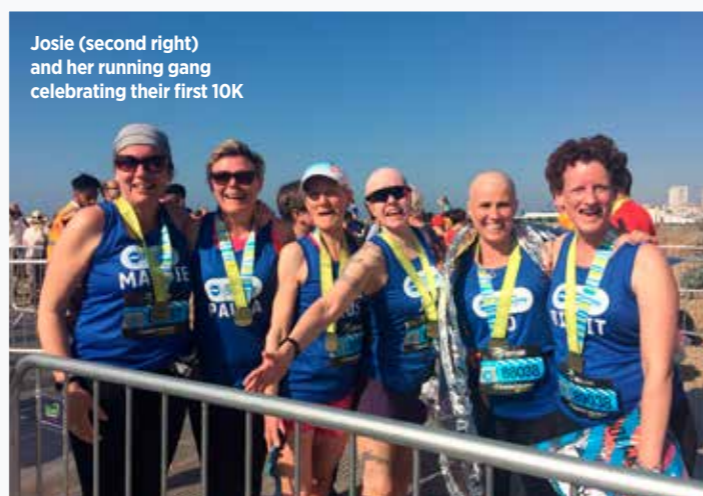
That was when I noticed the woman running beside me. She smiled and told me that she'd had cancer too and had run all through her treatment. It seemed hard to believe; she looked so healthy. We chatted and, after she gently told me to stop to catch my breath, she told me a story.

When she'd been at her lowest point, a stranger had approached her in a cafe and had said that she knew exactly what my new acquaintance was going through. Then, she'd taken off the little silver butterfly pendant she was wearing and had handed it over. 'A butterfly of hope,' she'd called it.

The woman catching her breath with me then took off the same butterfly pendant and put it around my neck, saying that she'd been wearing it for three years and it was time to pass it on. She told me that it was now my little butterfly of hope. She said that I must keep the faith and believe that my life would be better than ever on the other side of cancer. We hugged and, as I watched her speed off, I thought about what she'd said. Might it be possible, not just to survive cancer, but to thrive in spite of it? Somehow, I already knew that this one act of kindness might change my whole life.

SHOCK DIAGNOSIS

My breast cancer diagnosis had come as a terrible shock a few months earlier. I'd been sent a letter saying I'd been selected for a screening programme for women under 50 and was invited to the clinic for a voluntary mammogram. The appointment was just before Christmas and I nearly didn't go. I had a huge to-do list and, besides, I'd always shied away from



Josie (second right) and her running gang celebrating their first 10K

anything medical. I didn't 'do' illness, priding myself on my hearty constitution. But Emlyn, my husband, insisted that I go to check out the tiny dimple that had appeared in the bottom of my left breast. It was only visible when I put my arms right above my head and I'd reluctantly been to see the doctor about it six months previously, but like me, he couldn't feel a lump and thought it was fine. The mammogram technician noted the dent and said that nine times out of ten it was nothing, but that they'd likely call me back for a follow-up now.

The appointment was set for 3 January. This time, my to-do list had been replaced by a list of resolutions. I was looking forward to a quiet, focused month, during which I planned to stop drinking, eat healthily and get fit.

When I was asked to wait, it didn't occur to me that I was in a quiet room, until a nurse came in and sat down on the chair opposite. She gently explained that my mammogram had shown 'unusual breast tissue', so they were going to do a biopsy. I was reeling. 'Unusual, how?' I asked. There wasn't any history of cancer in my family. Surely this was a mistake?

The radiographer put warm gel over my breast and pointed to the cloudy area on the screen. I begged her to tell me what she could see, even though I knew she wasn't meant to. 'I can take it,' I reassured her. 'Well, I can't be certain, but from

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Facing a brighter future: Josie with her dog Ziggy in Brighton

Personal journey

experience, I'm afraid it looks like cancer to me,' she said. Right there and then, I knew my life had just taken a radically new direction.

Emlyn and I agreed that we couldn't tell our three daughters until I knew for sure what was happening and the following week was torturous, as we anxiously waited for the biopsy result. The word 'cancer' seemed to pulse through every thought. In the small hours, I'd lie awake, tears sliding down my face, as I contemplated everything I'd be leaving behind if the worst happened.

By the time the diagnosis actually came - that I did have breast cancer - it was oddly a relief to get practical and to start planning for my imminent mastectomy. At home, we asked our eldest daughter, Tallulah, then 16, to come into the sitting room so that we could break the news to her. Emlyn explained that we'd just come from the clinic and that I had some news. She looked at me, her eyes wide. 'You're not pregnant, are you?' she said.

I burst out laughing, then felt heartbroken as I had to tell her the truth. We reassured her as she cried, telling her that I'd be fine, that there'd be an operation and treatment, but that we'd get through it, that she'd have to be brave for her little sisters.

I tried to keep my fear away from Roxie and Minty, then only 13 and 10, but they were upset too. It was even harder telling friends and colleagues and soon I started to feel 'labelled'. I was a happily married mother of three with a successful career as a writer, but none of these definitions seemed to matter any more. It felt as if all anyone was saying about me was: 'She has cancer'.

It was Ros, a school mum, who came to the rescue. She was involved in a charity outreach programme and invited me to join her running group on the seafront. I wanted to hide under my duvet. Surely I should be taking it easy? But Ros was insistent that now, more than ever, it was important to stay fit.

FINDING HOPE

I was nervous. I didn't want to be in a 'cancer gang'. I didn't want to be defined by this slap of fate. But this brave, funny, diverse group of women weren't at all as I'd imagined. There was outspoken civil servant Jane, a tattoo-covered elder-goth, who was just ahead of me in treatment terms and already losing her hair after chemo; down-to-earth Paula, who worked with disadvantaged teens; wise driving instructor Maddie; singing teacher and political activist Birgit and gentle Hannah, who was struggling to find her mojo now that her treatment was over. Soon, they were irreverently regaling me with stories of what they'd been through, but I liked their spirit and their gallows humour. As we all set off on a slow run, I felt that laughing and running in the sunshine was making me feel more like myself than I had done in weeks. I had lots of supportive friends, but it was so comforting to meet people who really knew how I felt.

Very soon, I was looking forward to seeing my new tribe for our regular 'chogs' - chat and jogs. The running felt good for me, but the camaraderie was even more important and when they all revealed that they'd signed up for the Brighton Marathon 10K, I said I would try to do it too, even though it fell just before my third round of chemo.

We started the race on a clear spring day, feeling anything but 'cancer victims'. It was so tough, but after meeting the



In it together: Josie and Maddie cross the finishing line



The 'cancer ladies' Paula, Josie, Maddie, Birgit, Hannah and Jane celebrating together

butterfly lady, I caught up with my gang and as we all flew over the finish line, applause ringing in our ears, we were jubilant.

After the race, we kept running weekly, in spite of the fact that the worst of my treatment was still to come. There were days when the chemo made me feel utterly wrung out. Then the radiotherapy left me exhausted, but the thought of seeing the girls kept me going. No matter how terrible I felt, I always managed to put on my trainers to meet them.

We'd become proper friends by now, WhatsApping all the time and meeting once a month for a curry night, too. When my treatment finally finished in July 2018, they were the people I celebrated with and when Maddie got married, we all wore special corsages, still a team.

Last year, I turned 50 and I threw a huge party in a field for all my friends and family. It was - hands down - the happiest day of my life. I was filled with gratitude and love for these amazing people who'd seen me through the dark times. And, as I danced through the night in a sequin jumpsuit, I realised that having a mid-life shake-up had been no bad thing.

That busy woman who ignored her health has gone. Now, I put my own needs at the top of my list, rather than the bottom. I still run, and I also do a daily qigong routine and walk with my dog, Ziggy. I take life a day at a time, but staying fit and healthy is a top priority - as much for my mental as my physical health.

One day soon, I hope to pass on the butterfly necklace, with its message of hope. Thankfully, with our amazing treatments, cancer isn't always the death sentence I thought it was when I was first diagnosed. Just as the stranger in the race prophesied, my life really is better than ever... thanks to a little help from my friends.

• *The Cancer Ladies' Running Club (HQ, HarperCollins)* by Josie Lloyd will be published in May 2021 □

PHOTOGRAPHY: XXX