



A Breath of Hope

LUNG FOUNDATION



It was the last thing Christi Connelly expected after a routine breast MRI, but in October of 2018, her annual exam showed a golf ball size mass in the upper right lobe of her lung. After numerous tests, a biopsy, and eventual surgery followed by an 8-day stay in the hospital, her original diagnosis of stage 1 adenocarcinoma became a stage 3B lung cancer diagnosis. Given Christi's age (51) and her active lifestyle and nonsmoking history, lung cancer was the furthest thing from her family's minds.

After having the mass removed, Christi underwent chemo and radiation and then began immunotherapy. In January of 2020, she asked to have her routine scans moved up as she had been experiencing pneumonia symptoms and bouts of nausea. Christi received comprehensive biomarker testing after results showed over 50 spots on both lungs and the cancer had metastasized to her brain. The biomarker test revealed an EGFR mutation which led her care team to prescribe a targeted therapy called Tagrisso. Tagrisso was approved for use in April of 2018 for the 1st-line treatment of patients with metastatic non-small cell lung cancer whose tumors have epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) mutations (exon 19 deletions or exon 21 L858R mutations).

Even with the terrible news that her cancer had progressed, it is like winning the lottery when a lung cancer patient finds out they have a biomarker that has an approved and effective treatment. This was a turning point for Christi, and she is doing well today, two and a half years later.

Christi describes her ongoing experience with lung cancer as a physical and spiritual journey that has tested her strength but has also allowed her to grow in faith and become a stronger person. Even in the beginning, Christi did not ask, "Why me?" Instead, she asked, "Why not me?" At the very beginning of her journey, her husband looked at her and said, "Game on!" It has been their motto ever since. She finds support and hope through her family, friends, bible study, support group, A Breath of Hope events, and she has been especially inspired by Christian music. After years of teaching preschool bible classes, children's hymns run through her head with every scan and test.

Christi wants other survivors to know that research and new discoveries matter – her current therapy is evidence of all that science can lead to and has given her years of life she may not have had if diagnosed just five years earlier. She also wants others to remember that the lung cancer journey is like a cha-cha, one step forward and one step back. No two days are the same. She hopes lung cancer survivors with this 'terminal/not so terminal' cancer will remain hopeful, knowing that a bad day will likely lead to a better day.