

Cancer survivor **Sandra Muvdi:** *'I had no choice but to be strong and fight'*

Sandra Muvdi was making a presentation on behalf of the Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation at a medical conference in Clearwater in January 2014 when she received a call from her surgeon. "Although my world is surrounded by cancer because of my work, I was caught off guard when I heard the scariest words: 'you have breast cancer,'" she says. "My life turned upside down immediately feeling numb, petrified, [in] denial and wanting to escape reality. I felt I wanted to run away from myself."

Muvdi was already painfully familiar with the fight against cancer. She had lost her young mother and her only child to the disease.

"I knew I had no choice but to be strong and fight," she says.

Muvdi says she was inspired by the tenacious kids the Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation assists through chemotherapy. And she found strength from her family and friends, too.

"I don't know if the outcome would have been the same if it wasn't for them," she says. "Many acts of kindness by my friends and prayers kept me positive. My family came from Colombia to help me throughout my cancer journey. It was a team effort, and knowing that I was not alone."

Although the Stage II cancer was only in her left breast, Muvdi says she chose to have a bi-lateral mastectomy and reconstruction at the same time. "My decision was radical," she says, "[but] I won't have to worry about my other breast, mammograms, ultrasounds, MRIs; and both my breasts will look the same."

With over two decades of experience in cancer-related work, Muvdi knows the importance of choosing "doctors you trust so you surrender in the best hands and hopefully obtain the best possible outcome."

"I felt I was in the best hands choosing Dr. Charles Vogel, UM Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, as my oncologist. Dr. Vogel and his assistant nurse, Colleen Brennan-Doran, offered me first-class service throughout my cancer journey. I continue to see them every three months."

She says the experience has made her appreciate the importance of "slowing down and smelling the roses, making 'me' a priority," and managing her life instead of it managing her.

Two months after her last breast-cancer procedure, she went on a three-month journey that visited 12 countries and 25 cities. "I decided I was not going to wait for the right time, but rather make it the right time to do all the things I want in life."

One of those is to continue helping children fight cancer through the charity Muvdi created 11 years ago, in memory of her daughter.

"After earning my cancer survivor badge and gaining an understanding of what these little warriors experience," she says, "I am even more committed to the mission of the Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation." ●

— Dennis Richardson

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