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COPING WITH CANCER

Interview with Michelle and Philip

Michelle: *“With the breast cancer it was what do we do now?”*

Philip: *“My first reaction was shock and then you start to say well ok how do we move on, how do we tackle this, what do we do?”*

Michelle: *You know you just realise that you do have a God that looks after you”*

Interviewer: Michelle it started in about 2008 when you were diagnosed with a brain tumor. Tell us what happened from there?

Michelle: Shocking head ache to start with. I had scans and found out it was definitely a brain tumor and quite possibly benign, so that's what we worked on. Then I had all the tests and found that it was that - called a frontal lobe meningioma. I had surgery, and then about three months of recouping at home.

Interviewer: Something happened between being diagnosed for your brain tumor and then having surgery for it.

Michelle: Yes. Breast cancer.

Interviewer: How did that come about?

Michelle: I was waiting to have my surgery for my brain tumor. We decided to go to Victoria for a holiday to see my parents, because we knew that we wouldn't be able to travel for three months. In that time we had a letter through to have a mammogram. I had my mammogram and found out I had breast cancer. That was a big shock and we had surgery straight away for that. Two weeks after that I had my brain tumor out, and after that started radio therapy. And that was pretty straight forward. I'm in awe of the people that do the radiation, but more so for us, we were blown away by the amount of people that are waiting each session for radiation. That used to blow us away each time. They'd be ten deep, all day long. And I think they were ill. I didn't classify myself as ill. They were ill people, and I think when you see how many other people are worse than you are, that's a big grounding too, because you think I'm not going through that, what they do.

Interviewer: How were you feeling Philip, through that whole period of brain tumor, breast cancer, treatment?

Philip: I think Michelle gave me my strength because she didn't break down and go into a big heap or anything like that. She moved on with everything. We do it as a partnership and in all honesty, it wasn't that hard.

Interviewer: Where would you say that strength came from?

Michelle: I think everybody's so matter of fact and everybody knows what they are doing. I think that's the biggest thing.

Interviewer: So that gives you confidence?

Michelle: Absolutely. You just realise that you are in good hands. There was no waiting around.

Interviewer: Was that a blessing, that the surgery happened so quickly?

Michelle: Absolutely. No dwelling time. Probably a longer wait for the brain tumor, but we chose to put surgery off, which was lucky because if we hadn't put that off, I wouldn't have had the mammogram, which was probably life-saving.

Interviewer: And then something else happened after that. A third round!

Michelle: Yes. Hodgkins.

Philip: We thought it was lung cancer.

Michelle: Yes, we were diagnosed with lung cancer and when we were thinking it was lung cancer, we thought damn, well the cancer's got me. It wasn't like I'm over this, it was like ok, it's got me.

Philip: I think to start with I probably went numb, because you know that that's not a good diagnosis.

Michelle: So then to find out it was Hodgkins, we thought how lucky is that. That's different altogether.

Philip: That's treatable.

Michelle: And if chemo doesn't work, there are other things that can happen. I thought I'd been so lucky escaping chemo with breast cancer. I was a little bit smug I think, and then got hit with that. But that was much better than what I anticipated.

Interviewer: Can you tell us about the chemo treatment, especially for those who haven't gone through it themselves?

Philip: Each dose seemed to bring something different. You couldn't say each dose was going to be the same, because one time Michelle would be tired....

Michelle: Tiredness was the worst.

Philip: Another time she'd feel ill, so it all varied.

Michelle: There's times that you don't sleep. There's times that you're constipated. There's times that you've got diarrhea. There are times when you can't eat. There was only once that I actually felt ill, and that was the third or fourth day in, after the first session. But luckily I had a friend who had been an oncology nurse that lined us up with everything that we could possibly need in the house to cover every aspect of it. It all worked.

Interviewer: Through all of this, did you suffer any depression with it?

Michelle: No, I probably was just honest with myself. Like ok, you can't do that - you'll have to work around it. The days that I sat out of bed for the whole day, I was wrapped. But the days that I couldn't, I couldn't, and that was all there was to it. But you know, the kids would always call in, or the grand kids. Jack would walk in and he'd say something like, 'ah, Nan's not too good today. It's her chemo that's caused that'. One day Jack was with us and he said, "Nanna, when you feel better, after you've had chemo, can you buy me a pony?" I think he thought he'd get me while I'm down. Haha. He didn't win.

Interviewer: Your chemo recently finished in two thousand and fourteen. Where are you at now?

Michelle: Still tired. I've had an infection after I finished chemo, so that knocked me around for probably the last two months. The oncologist told Philip the other day when Philip asked him last Wednesday, how long does he think that this will all take, and he said at least twelve months.

Interviewer: And at this point it looks like it's all treated and it's all clear?

Michelle: Yes, and all in remission.

Interviewer: Michelle, what support has been really helpful through this journey?

Michelle: We've got a really good network of friends. There's been three young girls that have made sure there were meals here for us the whole time. Where I was working at a cafe, their chef made sure she'd call and bring meals to us and made sure that if we weren't going ok, we'd order dinner through them. It would always be plated up for us just to bring home. Things like that. Just nice things. A lot of Christian friends as well, caring through the church group. Having prayer groups. And I've always been very open about anything that's happening in my life, so they know how to deal with me. So we had complete honest support. And that helps too you know, and being very open about everything.

Interviewer: So you're not trying to do it on your own?

Michelle: No, that's it. And I think we've got such a good close family unit. I think that's such an amazing thing to have in your life as well. So, there was no stress in our house at all. I think that was a big thing.

Philip: The caring of our friends that were milling around. It was brilliant.

Interviewer: You are both Christians and have a relationship with God. How important has that been in handling all of these health issues?

Philip: For me, extremely important. A lot of prayer, and those prayers have been answered. And I think that helps you get through as well. To me, it makes it easier to hang on.

Interviewer: How would you feel if those answers weren't that Michelle went into remission, but that the cancer took her life?

Philip: It would have been tough, but I would still have accepted it because we're only here for a short period of time on this earth anyway as far as I'm concerned. There's a bigger picture. It would have been devastating, but if that's God's will, then so be it.

Michelle: I feel the same way. Absolutely. I just think I've been lucky to get through things the way I've got through things and I think I've always been grateful for the life that I've had - very thankful, and I think even in my prayers I never really asked for anything. I've always just been thankful for what I have had. But there are a few times there that I'd be saying ok, I need help with this lot. And you get through it. And it's good. Just even simple things you'd have answers for. There'd be a phone call from somebody just to help you through. I think there's a plan for your life and you have to accept that plan.

Interviewer: Philip, when you mentioned the bigger picture, how would you describe that to someone who hasn't had that Christian experience?

Philip: Well someone that hasn't had that Christian experience - they're here on this earth, then it just stops. I haven't got that picture. Mine is the life after with my maker, and have the rest of my life in heaven with him, and that's what I'm looking forward to.

Michelle: Probably the same for me too, but I just like to know that while I'm still living I make the best of what I can as a person.

Interviewer: **Has going through the brain tumor, the breast cancer, the Hodgkins changed your perspective on life at all?**

Michelle: No, I don't think it has changed my perspective. I just think that it's probably made me a little less impatient. I'm always on the go and want things to happen, and that's probably made me a little bit more relaxed. Your body tells you that you have to settle down, so that's probably been a big thing too. That it doesn't matter if things don't happen.

Philip: And I would probably say I take a lot less for granted now. And I thank the lord for a lot of things now that I never used to. I used to just get up and go, but now I appreciate a lot more.

Interviewer: **For someone who is listening and maybe going through cancer at the moment, what encouragement would you have for them?**

Philip: Share the load.

Michelle: Yes, share the load. Talk about everything. That's the only way you manage. You don't have to hold anything in yourself. You don't need to. I think just appreciate all the medical people - they've been given a gift to treat us, so just go with it. Our oncologist said cancer is more like an infectious disease. He said it's so common now, it's a part of our whole life so we have to be open about it.

Philip: And I don't think we had any negative thoughts at any stage. It was always positive.

Michelle: Stay positive. And be open minded to what people have to offer. And be yourself. Don't try to be too brave. You do have a god who looks after you.