

FOREWORD

I first met Erin (Heenan) Ley when we were beginning our junior year of high school in Garden City, New York. Erin always loves a good time and always has a smile on her face – she’s a very approachable person. We also had a lot in common, so Erin and I quickly became best friends; we have remained so to this day.

We were only twenty-five years old when Erin was diagnosed with a life-threatening form of cancer – non-Hodgkins lymphoma – in May 1991. I was shocked – how this could happen to anyone our age, and to Erin of all people, was beyond my comprehension. As I watched Erin go through the demanding treatments that tested her courage, faith, and physical, emotional, and mental strength to their limits, all I kept thinking was that she *had* to get better. I knew Erin was an incredibly strong person, so I believed with all my heart that her physical and mental strength would make her healthy again.

This book is Erin’s story of her personal journey through cancer. She writes candidly about the many ups and downs she experienced – hope and despair, joy and distress, bravery and fear, tranquility and anger. Nevertheless, when Erin looks back and discusses those times with me, she always says she is grateful to have had the experience, and that it changed the direction of her life for the better.

The time Erin spent living with cancer gave her a priceless gift – the willingness and ability to look for the silver lining, no matter how difficult things get. Her diagnosis and treatments took her on a journey that tested this ability to the limit. Her life-and-death battle with non-Hodgkins lymphoma was the catalyst that prompted her to explore the deepest parts of herself, where she found strength and wisdom she didn’t know she had. With great admiration, I watched the strongest person I know keep getting stronger and stronger during the most difficult time of her life. And more than ten years later, when I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I drew strength from my memories of Erin’s struggle and ultimate success – they were so inspirational for me! Without realizing it, Erin had shared her priceless gift of optimism and faith with me.

When I told Erin about my diagnosis, she hopped right into the picture and played an amazing role in my journey with cancer. She made me realize that I *was* going to get through it, and that the cancer was not a death sentence. As Erin had shown me a little more than ten years before, it’s mind over matter. With her help and encouragement, and with the incredible support of my husband, Jerry, my will to live became bigger and greater than anything else. Cancer was the enemy, and I was going to beat this enemy. After radiation, a double mastectomy, numerous operations, seemingly endless medication, and everyone tilting their head asking me if I was okay, I finally got through it – I became a survivor. I ask myself to this day, *What would I have done without her?*

Now that all of the craziness is over, I want to thank Erin for her uplifting conversations and the gift of a St. Peregrine medal (the patron saint of cancer patients), which I keep in my wallet at all times. Erin showed me that when you recognize how strong you really are, you can battle anything. She helped me to see that I needed to grow stronger, grow as a woman, and realize that nothing would take me away from my life. And that is exactly what I did – with Erin’s support, I drew upon my never-ending physical, mental, and spiritual strength.

In this book, Erin does not minimize the physical and emotional pain and fear experienced by patients, their families, and their friends. On the contrary, she writes with searing honesty about the debilitating effects that her diagnosis and treatment regime had on her and everyone around her. As we, her loved ones, were helping her through this trying time in her life, she was doing the same for us. We were drawing strength from each other.

I realized Erin's strength as a woman when she lost her "crowning glory" hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes. I went with her to help her pick out wigs. That must have been a devastating experience for her, but she continued to smile and glow as the beautiful woman that she truly is. We actually had fun with it – Erin and I had so many laughs that day. Who would think?

The most inspiring part of Erin's message is that in the midst of all the pain, fear, and sometimes despair, she was able to find many positive things – important practical lessons, insights into herself and her relationships with loved ones, and the power and beauty of hope for the future. These are what Erin calls the perks of cancer. This book does not recount her experiences in chronological order. Instead, each section explains how Erin recognized and gradually embraced one of these perks, and how each has contributed to her development as a person.

This book is a gold mine of information, support, and inspiration for cancer patients, their families, and everyone who would like to more fully understand what a diagnosis of cancer means at the most intimate, personal level. In it, Erin gives practical advice on everything from coping with hair loss, how to tell strangers that you have cancer, and heartfelt words of support to others who find their lives turned upside down by a diagnosis of serious illness.

Ultimately, this book is about what Erin learned about herself, about others, and about the world while battling a life-threatening illness. It tells the story of one person's experience, but its message is universal – out of pain and despair, we can always find joy and hope if we are willing to look for them.

Thank you, Erin, for making my life richer and better than it has ever been before.

Kristin Linn Voels, Cancer Survivor