

Shonda's Story, In Her Own Words

In the summer of 1999 someone in my family noticed a spot on my back, a mole that just "didn't look right". I passed it off for a time but at the urging of our family physician, I made an appointment with a dermatologist to have it checked. The first go around, the doctor cancel my appointment for some reason, and an entire year went by before I thought once again about having it checked. The main reason for the procrastination was the simple fact that being in the sun was a very important part of my life, and a good tan was always a high priority. Well, a year later turned out to be *deja vu* all over again. Another appointment, another cancellation on the doctor's behalf. My mother was with me this time, and said had she not been there she would have never believed me.

In January of 2001 our family packed up and moved to Phoenix, Arizona. Even though my roots are back east, Arizona offered me one thing I could never get enough of- pure, almost unfiltered sunrays. Not long after we arrived I was at a family doctor's office for a normal checkup, when the doctor almost immediately let it be known that he did not like the spot on my back. I quickly told him the recent history, at which point he basically said, "I don't care, you're in Arizona now and these things are not to be taken lightly here".

After making this appointment I finally got in to see a dermatologist a month later in February. It took him very little time to tell me that the 'thing' that "didn't look quite right" needed to be biopsied. A word I'd never had personal contact with prior to that moment; it was a bit staggering to say the least. He removed the mole, sutured the little hole and told me "Don't worry, I'm 95% sure it's nothing" and handed me a number to call in 10 days and I would have my results. Worry? Na, 95% to a doctor was 100% sure to me. Well, 10 days turned into 36 hours, at which time I received a call, a call that would change my life forever. Thirty-six hours later I was told I was a person with cancer, Stage 2 malignant melanoma to be exact. Four more words that had invaded my quaint and quiet life like a train wreck. From the initial diagnoses came words, I, like every other person on earth, was scared to death of blood tests, chest x-rays, lymph node exam. All of these were needed to determine where and if the cancer had spread? What? I thought skin cancer was akin to a bad rash or something? Something you just went in and had cut off? How did we go from 95% sure of nothing to 95% survival rate?

Having said this, you should know I was not in the least bit surprised to have skin cancer. In the months prior to the diagnosis the spot would burn if it was in the sun or the area got hot, and it itch incessantly. From my sun chair to an operating table is basically what happened, and a 6-inch chunk of my back was removed. The days that followed are still foggy to me. It's funny, in a macabre sort of way, how something like this sheds new light on your world. I'm a cancer patient, HEY! I'm a cancer patient! My god, how can the world continue to go on around me as if nothing had happened? My husband was 2 hours away in Tucson, for spring training, but at that time, I had three children at home that needed a mother, and I had to continue to function as normal as possible.

Based on Curt and my prior involvement with ALS and it's patients, families and friends I knew one thing, education is the first step to healing inside and out. As I began to educate myself on this dreaded disease life rolled on, the season began and through Curt's achievements on the

field, many people got to know how and why we were going through what we were going through in our homes. It allowed us to spread the word of melanoma, of prevention, of awareness to many people around the world. If just one family, one person, were spared this series of events because they heard me speak then it would all be worth it, every scar, every tear and every hour of not knowing.

I had told myself very early on that people DO DIE from this, but grasping that was much harder since this was a personal struggle. I received letter upon letter from people around the world that had fought this horribly. Since my original diagnosis I have had 2 stage two melanomas, and four melanoma incitu's (pronounced in-sight-too) removed from my back, chest, legs and arms in 5 different surgeries. I also became aware that Arizona has the highest melanoma rate in this U.S. The problem with this, in addition to the disease, is that there was not one organization in this state that centers its attention solely on Melanoma, something I wanted to change.

Since day one, the goals of the SHADE Foundation have been very simple and very straightforward. The first and most important goal is education and awareness to our children. We teach our children the dangers of drinking and smoking, this should be no different; it's just as lethal, if not more so. Our second goal is to provide information on products and clothing that can protect from harmful UV rays, yet not make you look like some sort of fashion illiterate. I am hopeful that support groups and free counseling and educational seminars will also be a byproduct of this web site, to assist people that cannot afford these potentially lifesaving things.

For children, SHADE partnered with the Environmental Protection Agency to promote the SunWise curriculum in schools. I am so relieved that the state of Arizona has passed a law requiring teachers teach the SunWise program in the classroom. Now it is time to work on the 49 other states to catch up with Arizona. Much of the money SHADE raises is to put sun protective screens over playgrounds. Our most precious commodity deserves our most concerted efforts; our children need awareness and protection.

In the end though, I hope sharing my story will force you to get that checkup you've been putting off, or maybe never even considered. If something 'doesn't look right' there's a chance it probably isn't. Check your children, your spouse, anyone you care about, take a look, you could save a life.

God Bless and Stay Shaded

Shonda

Shonda Schilling