



Finding Strength in Community: My Journey with Cancer Support Community

By Erin Karlin

I've never been one to talk much about myself. I'm more of a doer, the kind of person who sees what needs to be done and quietly gets to work. But when I was diagnosed with breast cancer at 37, I realized that sometimes, sharing your story isn't about spotlighting yourself, it's about helping others feel less alone.

I found a lump at 36. After a mammogram, I was told it was benign, but six months later it had grown. **Three days after my 37th birthday, a biopsy confirmed it was cancer.** That moment changed everything. Looking back, I wish I'd known how important it is to advocate for yourself – ask questions, push for answers, and seek second opinions. It's advice I now share whenever I can.

My treatment – chemotherapy, radiation, physical therapy, and a lumpectomy – took place during the height of the COVID pandemic. I was working part-time and raising two young children with my husband. **It was a lot to carry.** But early on, I made a conscious decision to keep moving and find joy wherever I could. I ran a 5K and hiked to the top of Mount Helena during chemo, joined by a newly diagnosed breast cancer patient who became a close friend. We still hike together today, sharing stories about recovery and the challenges of survivorship. **Having someone who truly listens and understands makes the journey a little easier.**

Navigating the healthcare system can be overwhelming, but **Cancer Support Community Montana (CSCMT) is a safe place to ask questions, explore options, and feel heard.** Through my journey, I discovered that certain foods helped keep my white blood cell count high enough that I didn't need to undergo all of the suggested treatments. That small change gave me both physical and mental relief along with a renewed sense of control during a chaotic time.

Every cancer diagnosis is different, and our bodies respond in unique ways. Sharing what helped us – even the small things – could make a big difference for someone else. That’s the beauty of survivor groups: they’re not just about emotional support; **they’re about exchanging knowledge that could be a blessing for someone else on a similar path.**

Throughout this journey, I’ve met so many other cancer survivors. I’ve done my best to help them understand their treatment, navigate side effects, and feel less alone. **That desire to connect is what inspired me to help bring CSCMT to Helena,** so more people in our community can access the emotional support, education, and wellness resources they need to heal.

One of my most cherished memories with CSCMT was attending their Family Camp, at Camp Mak-A-Dream, in Gold Creek. **It wasn’t just a weekend getaway – it was a chance for my family to truly exhale.** Surrounded by the beauty of Montana’s mountains, we reconnected in ways that everyday life and cancer treatments had made difficult. We laughed, played outside, made art, and shared stories around a crackling campfire, complete with s’mores under the stars.

Meeting other families who understood what we were going through was incredibly healing. Through group activities, workshops, and shared reflection, we learned to cope not just as individuals, but as a family. The entire experience was a reminder that joy and healing can coexist, even in the midst of hardship. And the best part? **Every bit of it was offered free of charge.**

Now, more than three years after my last chemotherapy treatment and gratefully cancer-free, I am proud our community is working toward something truly transformative: a brick-and-mortar support center right here in Helena. **This center will be a safe haven for cancer patients, survivors, caregivers, and their families – a place to find strength, resources, and connection when it’s needed most.**

No one should face cancer alone. With CSCMT, we don’t have to. To make this vision a reality, **we need your support.** Together, we can build a permanent home, here in Helena, where hope and healing thrive for generations to come.



**ERIN’S STORY HELPS US UNDERSTAND
THE POWER OF COMMUNITY.**

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