

## Heart of the School 2008-09

Buenos días y gracias a todos que han venido hoy día. Good morning and thank you to everyone who came out today and a special thank you to all of our women of Peace. I am so honored to be speaking here today as the recipient of this year's Heart of the School award.

For those of you who don't know, I was diagnosed with breast cancer last May. I let the faculty know before the summer break, but I had to let my students know the very first week of school because I knew I would be bald by the second week. I am not a particularly private person to begin with, and I had a very good diagnosis, so it was not really difficult for me to share my experiences with chemo and radiation with my colleagues and students. I thought it was a great time to be working in an all-girl school because it's an issue that we will all face one day either with a friend, or relative, and many of us will deal with it ourselves.

My students were patient with me on days I was tired and when I had to leave school to go to doctor's appointments the subs always left notes saying how great the girls were. I wasn't surprised; as usual my students were one of the best things of my day.

The day the faculty presented me with the heart of the school award I was overwhelmed. It is such an honor to be recognized for your work as a teacher by other teachers! We all have such similar experiences each day and face similar challenges. Receiving this award meant that maybe the other teachers thought I had something unique to offer the school and the students.

That night I was telling a friend about my award and she said, "Congratulations! I guess you were the obvious choice this year." She was truly happy for me, but then I thought, 'Was I the obvious choice? Did I get this award because I got cancer?' It didn't really seem fair that I should win because I had a difficult disease.

Throughout the next several weeks many of my co-workers and students congratulated me and told me I was a wonderful role model. It was so generous, but the thought lingered. I finally aired my concern to some friends over dinner one night.

They said, "Kirsten, you're not the heart of the school because you have cancer, you are the heart of the school because of the way you're dealing with your cancer."

And I said, "But I'm just acting normally."

One friend said, "Yeah! Do you think everyone can handle cancer so calmly?"

"Well, what other way is there to handle it? I can't change it." I stated.

One friend said, "I would probably start obsessing about it." Another said, "I don't think I could be so open about it." A third added, "I'd be really depressed."

I nodded, trying to understand, but in fact those just didn't seem like very good options to me. And they really did seem like options. One was to look at the situation from the point of view of how unlucky I was that I was diagnosed with breast cancer at 31, with no family history, and no risk factors. Plus, I am a really healthy person. I eat healthy and exercise on a really regular basis. I wasn't the only one stunned by the news, my doctors were, too.

The other option was to realize how lucky I was that my doctor caught it as early as she did. How lucky it was that I could have just a lumpectomy, and lucky that I needed only 4 chemo treatments instead of 6 or 8 like other women, lucky that I could do my radiation after school so I didn't have to miss classes, lucky that I don't have kids that I had to worry about yet, and most of all how lucky I am to be at Queen of Peace.

Other faculty members were constantly asking me if there was anything they could do for me. Ms. Vorderer made a head scarf for me with my favorite colors, Ms. Cruse offered to take me to chemo treatments and Ms. Hansen did a majority of the planning and preparation for our Spanish 2's. Students brought in bracelets, pins and scarves they had gotten at breast cancer events and they cheered and brought me flowers at a Volley for the Cure event that we held right here in the gym last fall!

What I am trying to say is that, we all have choices. I chose to recognize all the energy and encouragement in my surrounding and in giving me this award I think my fellow teachers chose to recognize that energy and positive attitude in me. So now, I'd like to put this challenge in front of each of you. When you are faced with situations that seem overwhelming or unfair I challenge you to make the choice to find the positive in yourself and be willing to find the people who will help you meet your goals.

I would like to end with a poem by Goethe that I think best expresses this sentiment.

*I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element.*

*It is my personal approach that creates the climate.*

*It is my daily mood that makes the weather.*

*I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous.*

*I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration;*

*I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal.*

*In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, and a person is humanized or de-humanized.*

*If we treat people as they are, we make them worse.*

*If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.*

Thanks so much.