

Lily Zappulla

“I Don’t Care What Anyone has to Say; Cancer Sucks.”

Interviewer: Lily Zappulla (LZ)

Interviewee: (MN)

MN is a loving aunt, breast-cancer survivor, salon-owner, and one of the most influential people in my life. She has served as a role model and motherly-figure for me multiple times in my life. In 2002 she was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer. While cancer alone is an incredibly awful battle for a person to face, in my interview I also learned that during that same time period she was facing marital problems. In this interview, MN opens up about the hardships she faced in the early 2000s and how she overcame them all, ending up as a stronger and more appreciative woman.

LZ- What was your “crisis of meaning”?

MN- In 2002 I was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer. I was so angry. You know me, I am always eating healthy, working out, and making sure I am as healthy as possible. I thought it was so unfair.

LZ- So is that how you initially felt after being diagnosed? Angry?

MN- I was more terrified than mad, to be honest. Absolutely terrified. Coming from a family as close as ours, I knew this would hit hard for everyone. To be honest, I wasn’t even afraid of the possibility of dying. I was more scared of if I did die, what would I miss? I was just afraid of being left out.

LZ- It seems as though you weren’t even afraid for yourself, but for us?

MN- Exactly. I live my life through you guys. My family is my core. Without you guys, I would be crushed. I didn’t want to hurt you guys or put you through any of my misery. Especially since my husband and I were going through a difficult time, you guys were all that I had.

LZ- I never knew this! What was going on between you two?

MN- We hit that point in our marriage where we started to grow apart. It started a few months before I was diagnosed. We just found ourselves fighting a lot and on completely different schedules. Once I was diagnosed, it really took a toll on us. I didn’t know whether he was going to be there for me, through thick and thin, or if we would continue our downhill spiral towards divorce. But he saved me. I needed a friend, someone to always make me smile. And he was there. As awful as it may sound, getting diagnosed saved our marriage.

LZ- Well I’m glad you guys were able to work it out! What was the turning point in your diagnosis when you finally started to feel truly optimistic and overcame your crisis?

MN- Not until I was fully cured. I don’t care what anyone has to say. Cancer sucks. And is so scary. There was never a moment where I wasn’t completely terrified. Not until my final

treatment in 2008 where I was officially cancer-free did I finally take a deep breath and relax. But even then, it took a few months for me to finally feel completely free and calm again. Being sick for years on end, never knowing what the outcome will be, takes a toll. Now, I am happy as a clam! But I just didn't have the strength during my actual sickness to feel anything but afraid.

LZ- I think it's strong of you to admit that you were afraid, instead of hide! How do you feel now, as a cancer survivor?

MN- Free. For years, I was always terrified. Never knowing if I was going to wake up, or be able to make it through the day. Now, I can wake up and take a deep breath and know it will be a good day. I appreciate everything more now. I am so thankful to be alive and so thankful for the doctors who were able to cure me. I just feel like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders.

LZ- Any advice for people going through an awful time?

MN- Family and friends are everything. Cling to the people who make you happy. Never let them go, and NEVER take them for granted. I live my life now with a loving husband and closer-than-ever family. It shouldn't take a sickness or crisis for you to realize how special the people are in your life. And for the people going through a hard time, it's okay to be scared. Just don't be scared alone.

LZ:

I truly feel so much closer with my aunt than ever before. I am so happy I decided to interview her for this assignment. She is such a remarkable human being and I am so blessed to have her in my life. She reminds me so much of Marcus Aurelius. Reading his book was my favorite unit in class, and so many quotes relate to her life. The quote, "Living is more like wrestling than dancing: you have to stay on your feet, ready and unruffled, while blows are being rained down on you, sometimes from unexpected quarters," can be directly related to her life. MN had no idea she was going to get diagnosed with cancer. Everyone else in my family is incredibly healthy. It just happened. Life is not fair. But as awful as it was, she made it through and now appreciates her life and the people more than ever in it.

MN also reminds me of Hesse's *Siddhartha* because like him, after experiencing a huge crisis, she also discovered a lot within herself. The quote, "He looked around him as if seeing the world for the first time. The world was beautiful, strange and mysterious. Here was blue, here was yellow, here was green, sky and river, woods and mountains, all beautiful, all mysterious and enchanting, and in the midst of it, he, Siddhartha, the awakened one, on the way to himself," reminds me of MN's journey. After enduring an awful journey, she now appreciates life for all of its mysterious and enchanting ways. She discovered she is a strong woman, and now completely loves and appreciates everyone in her life. I love my aunt, and aspire to have her strength one day! I am so thankful she is still with us today.