



Finding light in the darkness

Jo walked the corridors of death when she was diagnosed with lymphoma at age 35. She knew there was something wrong with her, and after seven months of not getting any answers and progressively getting worse, Jo walked into hospital on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales, in July 2003 and refused to leave until the doctors found what was wrong. It was cancer.

Jo often sang at Christian Women's Conferences, captivating the audience with her smooth voice, punctuated with power at just the right time to demand full attention to the meaningful lyrics that revealed the secrets of her heart. A heart dedicated to serving God. Jo proved to be a woman of substance, determined to turn darkness into light—believing that God was in control of her life. "I was not going to let Satan triumph," she affirmed.

The doctors made it clear that chemotherapy was crucial to Jo's survival and alternative medicine would not be a wise option. Had Jo been older, without kids to worry about, she may have taken the chance with

Cancer. The word sends fear pumping through our veins. For every story of a loved one's bitter demise, there is one of survival. But long after the physical symptoms have gone, it's the emotional cancer, eating away at the hope of staying alive, that can destroy a person's soul. Can cancer be a blessing? Jo Hilder, wife and mother of four, shares her journey with Jacquelin Melilli . . .

journey

Can Cancer be a Blessing?

alternative medicine. The treatment meant spending a month in Sydney away from her family and caused Jo terrible physical pain—yet she claimed the cancer as a blessing and wrote pages of notes expressing her feelings.

Where her strength comes from

A few years later, in 2005, Jo unscrambled the words in her heart and created a musical montage of her journey through cancer by recording her first CD titled *The end of the circle*. It marked the end of her battle with cancer and the rebirth of the buried Jo. She found great power in words and a firm belief that God had a plan for her life. In her darkest moments Jo's mantra were the words of Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

"I named my CD *The end of the circle* because I feel that I'm like a circle. I think we all are. We tend to go around in a circle living our lives until a problem comes along and we ask God to help us out. We go from living happily, to crisis mode, then things smooth themselves out and we're back to living happily until the next crisis comes along, and we continue in this constant circle. My strength comes from believing that God is there at every point, whether I'm in distress in some ward having chemotherapy or whether I've just won a songwriting award."

Jo expressed that one of the biggest blessings she experienced was having to face who she had become after the cancer. The song *Just as well*, exposes Jo's vulnerable side.

*The heavy hand of what I know
Rests upon my head
Unspoken and unsaid
Ah me, to be free, to be free
Ah me mercy me...*

"That song is about getting away from what other people want me to do. It's about my lack of confidence, my need to surround myself with what's familiar, which held me back from doing what God wanted and from being true to myself."

At her lowest point—in the middle of radiotherapy treatment—when she was in the most horrible physical pain, Jo wrote a poem describing how she felt.

"I felt like I was at the bottom of a pool swimming back and forth, with no air and no direction, just turning at the end and swimming back again."

*Drowning in this quiet place
So easy to stop breathing
No more fighting, no more feeling
Feel the gentle touch of death come*



My strength comes from believing that God is there at every point

"In the end, I knew that if I didn't pull myself out, I would die. It would have been so easy to just give up."

Working through the fear

Jo met so many people, also having treatment, who had decided to stop fighting. They had accepted their fate and gave up the will to live. It took them a month to die. Even years after her treatment, Jo confided that she needed trauma counselling to help her get through the fear of the cancer returning.

"Cancer doesn't just cripple you physically; the worst damage it causes is the emotional fear that embeds itself into your mind. It's this fear that stays with you long after the physical symptoms have gone."

Sometimes, the fear was so overwhelming that Jo couldn't make even the simplest decision because she was convinced that



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she wouldn't be around, so she saw no point in planning for the future. One of Jo's remedies when these negative thoughts plague her is to play her song *Best Day*. "It's a song about living life to the full, as if today was your last day, your best day."

Jo's song *Rise Up* was in the top ten national finalists in the ABC Fresh Air Music Awards in 2005, and second in the Gospel category of the Pacific Songwriting International Competition in 2006. *Best Day* was in the top ten finalists. An excellent achievement for someone who lacked the confidence to make her dream of recording a CD come true.

Cancer is not a blessing, but Jo chose to see it as one. If she hadn't become sick, she believes she would still be existing, instead of living. Jo is now working for the Cancer Council, helping others to find the best treatment options. Her advice is:

- Seek professional help (not from the Internet)
- Contact the Cancer Council
- Organise a support/prayer group
- Arrange psychological support.

And finally, seek comfort in God's promises. CW

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