Advisory Board Members: Janice and Rex Cowden

Janice and Rex have enjoyed traveling, cruising, and exploring the world during their 40+ years of marriage. As parents of two adult children, and grandparents to three young grandchildren who live in different states, their love of traveling includes spending time with family whenever possible.

Their post-retirement dreams of spending months at a time exploring the US came to an abrupt halt when Janice was diagnosed with Stage I breast cancer in 2011, just 17 days following Rex’s retirement from a 31 year career in Civil Engineering. Janice had retired from her 20+ year career in nursing a few years prior. Janice had no family history of breast cancer, but had discovered a tiny, tender lump the year prior to her diagnosis. Unfortunately, the location of the lump was extremely difficult to include in mammogram imaging due to the proximity to the sternum and ribs. In 2010, Janice reported the discovery of this tender area to her Gynecologist at her annual exam, but her doctor was unable to detect any abnormality by exam, and was told not to worry about it because “cancer isn’t painful.” And, there was no evidence of abnormality on her annual mammogram.

Encouraging the mammography technician to include this area in her mammogram in 2011, a 1.5 cm mass was discovered, confirmed through ultrasound, and a subsequent biopsy revealed triple-negative breast cancer. Over the next 3 months, Janice would undergo a lumpectomy, followed by re-excision of DCIS margins, partial breast radiation, and 4 rounds of chemotherapy. It was nearly 5 years following her Stage I diagnosis that Janice’s Oncologist ordered a PET/CT scan to rule out metastatic disease based on Janice’s complaints of bone and joint pain at her annual Oncology appointment. This scan confirmed a metastatic recurrence of breast cancer, which was once again triple-negative. Once again, Janice endured more chemotherapy, followed by radiation. Fortunately, she had a complete response to her first line of treatment in 2016, and has remained no evidence of disease (NED) since November 2016.

It was in 2017 that Janice decided to attend her first Living Beyond Breast Cancer MBC conference in Philadelphia, where she participated in their Hear My Voice Advocacy Outreach training. As a caregiver, Rex’s desire was to support Janice in her quest for knowledge, but also to learn as much as possible about this disease. In doing so, Rex attended this MBC conference as well, and participated in multiple sessions including those specifically for caregivers. This was the beginning of Janice’s journey as a patient advocate, in which Rex has been an instrumental participant and supportive partner in.
In the past four years, Rex and Janice have attended multiple breast cancer conferences together, and participated in several interviews and MBC campaigns, to include those with Susan G. Komen, More For MBC, This is MBC and more recently Cure Today.

Because of Janice’s exceptional and durable response to treatment in 2016, Janice and Rex have once again begun to realize their retirement dreams of traveling, spending time with family and friends, and engaging in hobbies that they each enjoy. Patient advocacy keeps Janice very busy, having founded a Peer-to-Peer Support Facebook group as a trained support leader by METAvivor Research and Support, as well as participating in multiple patient initiatives and social media groups. Rex enjoys hiking and backpacking in his leisure time. They both continue to learn and grow by connecting with others who are living with MBC, and their caregivers.