

March Toward Life

By Mary Hinkebein Halsall, Ovarian Cancer Survivor

Some of the happiest moments of my teenage years were spent marching and making music with the Manual High School Marching Band in Louisville, KY, led and directed by the late Robert Griffith. I loved the summer band camps and looked forward to the many hours of practice in spite of Kentucky's sweltering and muggy days. Even though I have seen very few of my band buddies over the last 47 years, I will always remember how precisely we marched together while presenting incredible and powerful music. As I reflect back, I believe that these experiences are a very big part of the *march toward life* that I take today.

In 1998 I was diagnosed with Stage 3C Ovarian Cancer and was told that I had a 25 – 30% chance of living three to five years. Although I have experienced many physical and psychological demands during the past nine years, I still *march toward life*. It occurred to me right after receiving this diagnosis that I had two choices; I could feel sorry for myself, or I could accept this challenge and work through it. I also knew that this would be a tremendous challenge for my wonderful family and friends and I didn't want to burden them with negativity. Even though I experience a pity party now and again, I continue to march to the beat of the music. And my family and friends are in step to my right, left, in front and behind me.

I reflect on memories of my late sister Joan (Joanie) Hinkebein Monarch, and think how wonderful it would be if she was still here to grow old with me and the rest of our family. A 1959 Manual High School graduate, she passed away of Stage 3 Ovarian Cancer at the young age of 43 years. Maybe in some ways she is still here. Sometimes during chemo treatments, I feel Joanie's beautiful and caring spirit. She was an incredible nurse and really *marched toward life* for her patients. I think she also watches over my chemo doc and nurses. They possess that same deep caring spirit as health care professionals, very much like Joanie did. Thank you sis.

On a daily basis, my thoughts turn to the many chemo sisters that continue to fight their battles. Some like me are able to continue, but many become too sick and worn from the rigorous treatments and the cancer itself to stay alive. I feel sad to witness the end of life for such beautiful people - but remember each face from the happy moments we spent taking our treatments together and sharing wonderful stories with each other. We would also enjoy wonderful lunches on chemo days as one of my greatest enjoyments in life is marching in the kitchen. Who knows any Hinkebein sib of mine who doesn't? Preparing lunch and goodies for my chemo sisters and health care providers on treatment days continues to bring music to my march in life. I must add that my husband Jon never complains about how much money and time we spend doing this, and it is not unusual to have him marching right next to me during preparation.

I now live in Virginia and I am fortunate enough to have the strength and fortitude to have become involved with two ovarian cancer organizations, one in Northern Virginia and the other in Washington, D.C. I am a strong advocate about sharing information at health fairs, making presentations to any interested group, especially medical students at a University Hospital in D.C. about ovarian cancer symptoms and as much information as possible about this disease. I realize that this same program now exists at the University of Louisville and the University of Kentucky. It is part of the Ovarian Awareness of Kentucky's (OAK) quest to further enlighten medical students, and help hone their ability to fully listen and communicate with their female patients about changes in their bodies that may present possible symptoms. I am also frequently called upon to offer support and comfort to other patients who may be going through difficult moments.

As I continue my challenging steps, sometimes I think about those hot and wonderful days at band camp and I smile. I believe that we should all *march toward life* and share many smiles and hugs, and as much love and hope as we possibly can; that is the incredible and powerful cadence that resonates within each of us. I empathize with those of you who are faced with the rigors of a life threatening disease, directly or indirectly. May you find your inner strength to *march toward life*