

# Discover

## An Update with Nora Gross

By Heather White Brittain

Nora Gross knows what it is like to feel rejuvenated. Fourteen months ago her left breast was removed because of cancer. As a cancer survivor, she remembers wanting no part of that “diseased breast.” When she discovered that it wasn’t healthy, her response was to, “get it off now.”

A week after her major surgery, Nora found herself painting thank you cards for all her “wonderful friends” who showed their support. Remembering how it didn’t take long to be out and about again, self-admittedly she says, “It sure seemed long at the time; and it was painful.” Two weeks following her surgery, Nora learned that the cancer was not in the lymph nodes. Recollecting her relief, she said that up until then she hadn’t really processed the word cancer. Then reality set in.

On March 7th, 2008, Nora began receiving chemotherapy. When her hair fell out, she decided against wearing a wig. So she asked her husband, Adolf, to shave her head. “I had a nice shaped head,” Nora laughs, “I didn’t really mind being bald.” Chuckling and revealing she mentions, “The old head was cold all winter but I wore a colourful toque.” Pensively she states, “bald was the badge of courage and I was surprised not to be getting more stares.” Without skipping a beat, she adds, “Unfortunately cancer is common enough that bald does not raise eyebrows anymore.”

What has raised many eyebrows is the manner in which Nora has responded to cancer. From the onset, her reaction has been a display of attitude that speaks to the reality that cancer can be beaten. Perhaps equally important is a roaring outlook that cancer does not have to beat the survivor down. Many who have been affected by cancer in whatever way will understand that this is no small feat.

For Nora, it helps that she is outgoing and energetic and, she has a great sense of humour. She is not above laughing – even at her self. From her own admission: “Nora and normal just do not go in the same sentence.” When her hair started growing back, much to her delight, she discovered a new look. Her hair had turned curly from the chemo. Enjoying the changed appearance, she decided not to colour her hair any longer. The “dye money” is being saved in a jar now for something that will be good, she promises. “I am back to reaching my age and my hair is a beautiful steel gray and I have decided to stay that way.” Taking the same approach with her new



Photo credit: Shari Tucker.

found wrinkles, tongue in cheek she remarks: “The steroids made my face wrinkle free and now, I am looking my age.” What she doesn’t say is that there are far worse things than aging but then, Nora would know this.

Early into her illness, Nora began a communication, sending updates on her experience to hundreds of online friends and acquaintances. She felt that someone would benefit directly or in another way: “Everyone is not comfortable talking about something that takes lives,” she said. Over time, Nora would hear from other cancer patients who were looking to her for support and asking how she coped. Often times, she was able to help with advice gained from her personal experience: “So many women have been so thankful that it is now public and public enough that it could be talked

about. I made it look like it was not scary and that you are not going to die. I heard this from enough people,” she comments with a gesture of self-accomplishment.

Last year Nora became infamous when she posed for photographer, Shari Tucker, who partnered with the Canadian Cancer Society to portray images of people in their local communities changed by cancer. Word of mouth brought the two of them together and with confidence, Nora took off some of her clothes and bared herself – the breast that is remaining, and the one that was creatively painted with body paint by her daughter, Tamara. There are several poses and in each one; Nora is smiling and clearly, having fun. She was 63 when she became a “centrefold” and it was another occurrence in her life that was totally unexpected.

Participating in a variety of events to increase breast cancer awareness and support, Nora has become a public speaker of sorts and engages groups and individuals who benefit from her experience. “I think that I am some kind of help,” she notes. “I know that a lot of people have told me that I have been an inspiration.”

Looking back on her experience with cancer and how it has changed her for the better, Nora says: “We are all stuck into this world and sometimes we wonder what our purpose is. I hope that I have found my purpose and that is to inspire other people and especially people who think that their life is ho hum.” It is a serious moment of declaration. Next, Nora does what she does so well. She laughs.