

She calls it a huge test. A rotten joke.

Esther England was in a van with her University of Montana School of Fine Arts colleagues, coming back from a planning retreat in Seeley Lake in September 2000. A cloud of dust suddenly obscured their view, and a car hit the van head-on. Getting out of the van, the injured were then rear-ended by a pickup. Everyone in the van was hurt, but Esther had the worst of her group-- a ruptured spleen, broken ribs, head and knee injuries. But she made it.

Then, two months later while recovering, she found a lump in her breast. Tests confirmed it was infiltrating ductile breast cancer. Stage III, with 21 lymph nodes involved. She underwent a mastectomy, 12 rounds of chemo, and 35 radiation treatments.

But Esther has always been strong. "I'm proud that I've been able to live my life on my own terms. I've never been married. I've built my own house. I found there wasn't anything I couldn't deal with."

Esther grew up mostly in McCall, Idaho. She went to The University of Montana on a \$500 scholarship and soon the faculty realized she had a tremendous singing voice. She studied music, sang and performed. In her senior year, she was offered a soloist role in the Metropolitan Opera's touring company. A few days later, she was offered a Fulbright to study opera in Germany. She chose Germany. Then she chose a professional soloist position for three years, traveling all over Europe with the Bavarian Radio Choir. But something was missing.

When UM offered her a one-year contract, she joined the UM faculty in 1969 as a voice teacher. Teaching was hard, but she found joy in encouraging and supporting the students. Years later, she's had thousands of voice students who have gone on to be world-class opera singers, actors and teachers. Her larger-than-life personality was the perfect fit for her teaching, and she has been more successful than she ever imagined. Esther was awarded the University of Montana Distinguished Professor of the year in 1998 and the Montana Professor of the Year in 2002.

And then, after more than thirty years, the accident took her singing voice away, and the cancer diagnosis gave her one week of fear, but that was it. She wanted to be a partner in her care, and with the women's health providers from St. Patrick Hospital and the cancer physicians at Montana Cancer Center, she got that partnership.

"The physicians always had time to answer my questions. Some people just want to get through the process, but I really needed to know exactly what was going on, what every treatment and test meant. Drs. Snyder and Markette never were impatient. Once I saw how confident and direct they were, I could relax."

One particular friend took her to all her chemo sessions. Esther adjusted her teaching schedule so that she had chemo on Thursday, then returned to teach Monday nights. By the next semester she was teaching a full load.

She's never thought that cancer was some sort of spiritual experience. It was part of who she was and she used that in her teaching. She wanted her students to see that real people deal with

cancer. She refused to wear those god-awful turbans. She wore hats, and when those were uncomfortable, she would fling them off in the middle of a class.

So now, eight years after her diagnosis, she's a cancer survivor, and proud of it. "There's no mystical bond between survivors," she says. "I have a better insight into people. I'm just part of a club."

The best part about it? She's learned about cancer and friendship. She doesn't have to wear a bra. She discovered she has a well-shaped head.