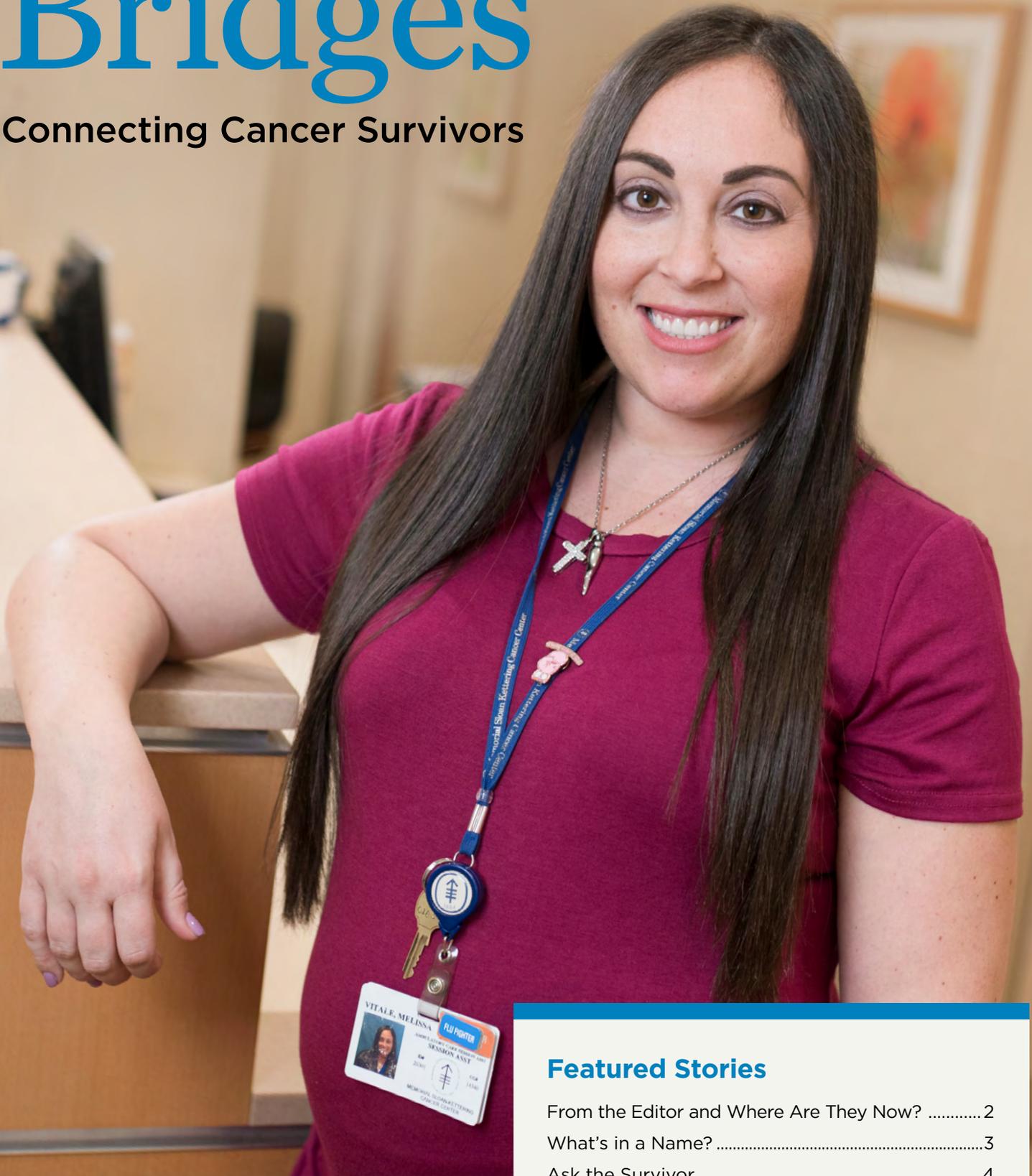


# Bridges

Connecting Cancer Survivors



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## From the Editor

By Eileen F. Gould



*Bridges* has given many of us a voice to discuss a topic that very few people discussed 20 or 30 years ago.

There were no newsletters, support groups, or specially trained social workers or psychotherapists to seek help from. Here at MSK, *Bridges* is a forum for patients, their caregivers, and families to share their stories of hope and survival. Sharing your story may give hope to those who are newly diagnosed and embarking upon the start of their treatment; it can let them know there is light at the end of the tunnel in the world of cancer. The American Cancer Society now defines survivorship as beginning on the day you are diagnosed.

We are always looking for more stories and are available to answer any of your questions about submitting a story. *Bridges* publishes quarterly in both a print and online version. We currently have more than 5,500 online subscribers and distribute hardcopies at all MSK locations across Manhattan and the regional locations.

If you would like an email copy of *Bridges*, please sign up at [www.mskcc.org/bridges](http://www.mskcc.org/bridges) to join the mailing list.

## Where Are They Now?

By Paul M. Onder

### **Reinvention is the bridge to a new Life after Leukemia.**

My story of Survivorship begins with the Bridges article “Meet Paul” of the Fall 2010 edition. I wrote about reinventing my Life and how my cancer experience was going to be a positive in my Life. After the article became a reality for all to read, I had to put these words into action.

The first action that I was compelled to do was to quit my hands-on career as the District Plumber, working for a northern New Jersey Board of Education. I could no longer work in public bathrooms because of the need to protect my health and Life.

Because this Door closed, a new Door opened for me to reeducate myself with a nine-month Business Operations Course, complete with certificate. This course allowed me to study marketing. The passion to promote the word “Life” has become my Righteousness.

When the next Door to education opened, I began work as an Instructor. The year was 2013, and I was offered a position to teach Plumbing/Heating for a New York City private school of trades. I continued with other schools, and now I am currently working



for a public school in New Jersey, teaching the same. Because I need to achieve a CTE certification to teach, I must complete a two-year course at an approved college. I am enrolled in school with months to go.

I ponder my Life today and how this Cancer story triumphs on.

# What's in a Name?

By Melissa Vitale-Ledger

Melissa loves being a mom and spending time with her family and friends. She enjoys going to the beach and any summer activity. She is a Senior Care Coordinator at Memorial Sloan Kettering.



I was 25 when I was diagnosed with cancer in November 2011. I remember being petrified and not knowing what the future would hold. With my family by my side, we attended the first appointment at MSK; while I cried during the entire consult, my parents stood strong for me. We were told I would need chemo followed by two surgeries, which included having an ileostomy for nine weeks until the reversal surgery. Just a week or so later, I had my port placed in my chest for the upcoming rounds of chemo to start this journey.

My parents and I then had to come back to MSK to get the Neulasta shot. I recall dreading the horrible bone pain that was to come.

After many tears, we started to receive good news. My tumor was responding incredibly well to the chemo! My amazing doctors were miraculously able to eliminate the radiation part of my treatment. I did some extra rounds of chemo, but that was all worth it to preserve my body to hold my own pregnancies in the future.

I admired the whole staff at MSK while I was being treated and coming in for multiple appointments. I mentioned to my doctor and the clinical staff that I had submitted my résumé, hoping to join this amazing team. Within a month or so, I was called back from Human Resources at MSK to come in for an interview! I was then hired November 2014, and I have been here ever since.

Fast-forward to September 2016: I got married, and then January 2017, we were blessed to find out we were expecting our first baby. My son, Salvatore James, was born September 14, 2017. I am currently living on Staten Island with my husband, son, and dog. We are only two minutes away from my parents and sister; with a horrible journey behind us, we have many more happy moments to come, and of course I still want and need them every step of the way. More joyful memories came in October 2018. We found out that we were expecting our second baby! In May 2019, not only will I be seven years cancer free, but our baby girl is due. We are naming her Alessia Sloane, after the amazing doctors who saved my life here at MSK.

## I admired the whole staff at MSK while I was being treated and coming in for multiple appointments.

Treatments were far from easy, but with my family and friends by my side, we got through it together. Every other Thursday, after treatment in the chemo suite, I was hooked up to another treatment that came home with me for the next day and a half. My dad had to learn how to disconnect the chemo and flush my port so this could be done first thing on those Saturday mornings at home.

May 16, 2012: It was time for my first surgery. I was beyond scared, and waking up with the ileostomy was one of the worst feelings I felt during the whole journey. Once again, my family stood strong for me. After what felt like an eternity, July 17, 2012, finally came for my reversal surgery to remove the ileostomy and get back to my new normal self. The recoveries were difficult, and I felt like I would never be back to myself.

## Ask the Survivor:

# Mediterranean Diet

By Joyce Ciesielka

### Why did you try the Mediterranean diet?

I had heard about the Mediterranean diet and had always been interested in trying it. However, it wasn't until my nurse practitioner mentioned it to me during my annual checkup in the survivorship clinic that I decided to try it. After the appointment, I researched the diet to see if it was something that I would be willing to commit to. I discovered all of the important health benefits that are associated with the diet, including a reduced risk for heart problems and lower glucose levels. These changes would be especially positive for me given my history of chemotherapy and radiation.

### What did you like (and not like) about the diet?

Overall, switching to the Mediterranean diet was a simple transition for me and my family. It required me and my family to eat more vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains, nuts, and fish. I like that the food items you can eat on this diet are readily available in local farm markets and grocery stores. You can even obtain a lot of the fruits and vegetables in the frozen food aisle if they are not in season. As my family began to follow the guidelines, we observed that we had more energy and a more sustained feeling of fullness after our meals. I also enjoyed the fact that by focusing on these products, I was able to try different vegetables prepared many different ways instead of simply having them the same old way.

The only aspects of the Mediterranean diet that I don't personally like are the fish and seafood as well as the slightly increased food budget and food prep time. To cut down on the prep time, we occasionally purchase fresh, pre-cut fruits and vegetables. This can be more expensive so we try to purchase what is in season or buy frozen, to keep within our budget. By taking a few hours on the weekend, my husband and I can get a head start on the week by either cutting up produce or batch cooking meals.



Joyce lives in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, with her husband, Paul. She has two children. She is a thirteen-year, three-time Hodgkin lymphoma survivor.

This helps tremendously and allows us to stick to our meal plans. This is a lifestyle change, and the benefits definitely outweigh the extra time and money.

### How did you incorporate the diet into your life and did your family agree with these changes?

It was very important for me to have my family's support in this lifestyle change. After discussing the health benefits of the diet, my family happily joined me. My husband and I started by looking at recipes that we would like to try. We initially began by doing the Mediterranean diet meals a couple times a week so that we could see what we liked while also clearing out some of the products that we already had in our house. Once we had finished all the non-Mediterranean foods, which included red meat, processed foods, and non-healthy fats, we fully transitioned to the diet. One of the first things we decided to do was join a local farm's community supported agriculture (CSA) in which we received a weekly basket of in-season fruits and vegetables. Based on the basket items, we made frittatas, roasted vegetables, salads, soups, or stews, which were not only were delicious but also very satisfying. We prepared weekly meal plans, and found alternatives like chick pea pasta and nuts for snacking. Throughout this process we were able to see the improvements in our health, wellness, and appearance.

■ *Continued on page 8*

## Ask the Professional:

# Mediterranean Diet

By Emily Tonorezos, MD, MPH



Emily Tonorezos is a general internist and Director of the Adult Long-Term Follow-Up Program. Her research focuses on helping cancer survivors prevent the side effects of treatment through healthy living.

Always check with your care team before making any changes to your diet.

### What is the Mediterranean diet?

The first descriptions of the Mediterranean diet came out of the island of Crete, in Greece. There, the traditional diet includes lots of fruit, vegetables, beans, and whole grains. Red meat (beef, pork, lamb, or goat) is scarce. The primary source of fat is olive oil. Meals often include wine and are eaten sitting down at a table with other people. These foods and this style of eating have not changed for generations. Compared with what most Americans eat, the Mediterranean diet has about twice the fruit and a tiny fraction of the red meat. Time and again, in studies from around the globe, the Mediterranean diet is associated with a lower risk of stroke, heart disease, cancer, dementia, and many other illnesses.

### What are the most important parts of the Mediterranean diet?

Many researchers have tried to figure out if one part of the Mediterranean diet makes it so healthy. Some evidence suggests that not eating red meat is the most important part. In all likelihood, it is all important: whole foods, naturally grown, eaten with family and friends.

### Is there evidence that the Mediterranean diet is beneficial for cancer survivors?

We conducted a study of adult survivors of childhood leukemia who were overweight or obese. No one was eating a strictly Mediterranean diet. Many survivors had very unhealthy eating habits. Survivors who were eating more fruits and vegetables, less meat, and more whole grains averaged lower cholesterol, better blood sugar levels, and less obesity than those who were eating a lot of meat, salty snacks, and refined grains.

Recently, researchers from Germany and Austria pooled data from lots of Mediterranean diet studies. The results did not prove any reduction in cancer-related deaths or cancer coming back. But many individual studies reported benefits to symptoms and treatment-related side effects.

### What do you recommend to cancer survivors who want to improve their diet?

Some simple changes can make a diet more Mediterranean. First, eat less red meat. I recommend two times a month or fewer. Remember, for a Mediterranean, red meat includes beef, pork, lamb, or goat. Survivors should especially avoid smoked, preserved, or salted meats. If you substitute fish and shellfish for red meat, that is good, but if you can

substitute beans, nuts, and whole grains instead, that is even better. Second, start eating more fruits. Try eating a whole fruit instead of a processed or ultraprocessed snack. Ultraprocessed food, which includes stabilizers, preservatives, and flavor enhancers, is particularly un-Mediterranean.

Importantly, while wine is on the menu in Crete, I do not recommend alcohol in any form to my patients.

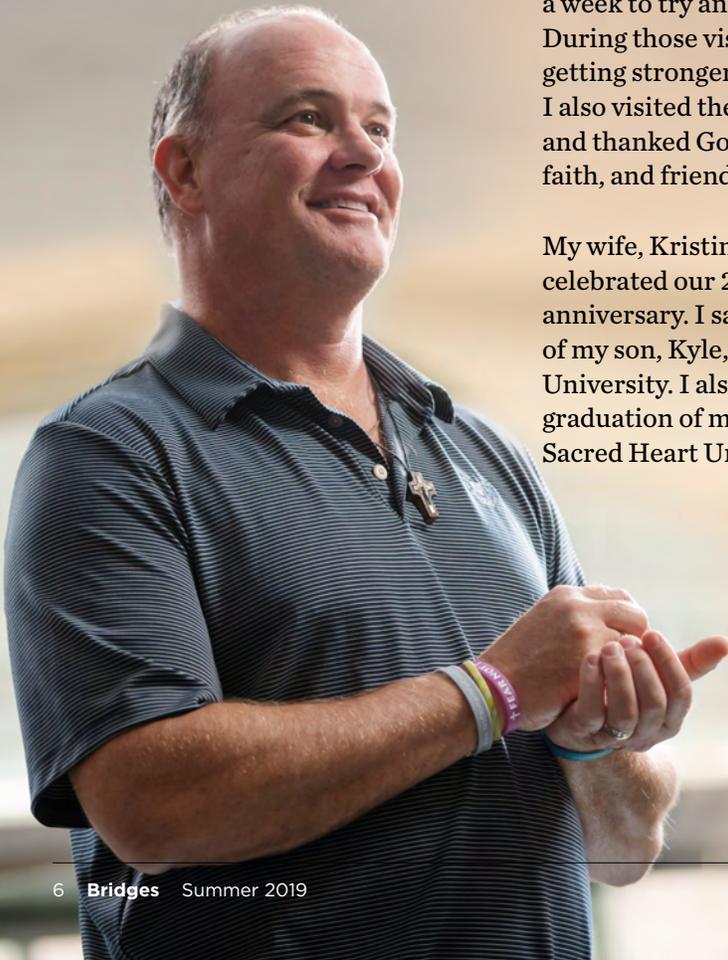
The principles of the Mediterranean diet can be incorporated into many family favorites. MSK has a curry quinoa salad recipe on the website. It's not a Mediterranean dish but a lovely example of meshing Mediterranean diet principles with flavors from around the world.

MSK Recipes for People with Cancer: <https://www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/nutrition-cancer/recipes>

# Keeping the Faith

By Christopher Lynch

Unfortunately, people often think the worst when they're diagnosed with cancer. My approach was to take one day at a time, do what I had to do, and continue to live life.



Well, plenty has happened since February 2016 when I first learned that I had stomach cancer. Working as a teacher and coach for the past 32 years, I am so grateful that I am still able to do what I truly enjoy doing. I strongly feel that the prayers and well wishes from my students and players, as well as the fine doctors and nurses at Memorial Sloan Kettering, have allowed me to be cancer free since January 2018.

I received wonderful support from the administration at the high school where I work, Chaminade in Mineola. They broke the news about my initial diagnosis to the students: My tumor had metastasized to my brain, but it was successfully removed from my cerebellum. When I finally returned to school for a visit, I received a rousing standing ovation from the student body. That love and support gave me the courage to battle my cancer. I continued to visit school and see the students as much as I could while receiving treatments. I also went to the weight room once or twice a week to try and keep my strength up. During those visits, I pictured myself getting stronger each and every day. I also visited the chapel at school and thanked God for my family, faith, and friends.

My wife, Kristina, and I have since celebrated our 26th wedding anniversary. I saw the graduation of my son, Kyle, from Villanova University. I also plan on seeing the graduation of my daughter, Cara, from Sacred Heart University next year.

I feel lucky and blessed. The support I have received from my family, Chaminade, students, parents, and alumni has given me strength to continue to stay strong as I get CT, MRI, and endoscopic procedures as well as to keep a positive approach to dealing with this disease. I have been in remission for seven months. I truly feel like Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*. The doctors did such a fantastic job with all their treatments.

Unfortunately, people often think the worst when they're diagnosed with cancer. My approach was to take one day at a time, do what I had to do, and continue to live life. I believe that God truly does not give you what you cannot handle. Even though sometimes things are not what you expect, you have to continue to get up each and every day and try to do the best you can. I tell my students that sometimes things will not go their way. They will get knocked down. They will have to continue to get back up.

I truly believe that God has a plan for each of us. We all should be able to draw strength from family and friends. My inner strength has definitely come from my wife and children as well as the thousands of young lives I have hopefully helped in some way to become the people they are today. Continue to fight, stay positive, and live!

Christopher Lynch is 54 years old and married with two children, ages 21 and 23. He has worked for the past 32 years as a teacher and coach at Chaminade High School, in Mineola, New York.

# Cancer = Happiness?

By Leslie Handler

I try to be grateful for every day I have. Cancer has actually taught me that.

I'm a writer. I write mostly personal essays about, well, my personal life. So when I've lived through, and survived, years of recurrent oral cancers, it's been hard not to write about it. It's taken over such a large part of my life that, somehow, it always shows up one way or another in my essays. I worry that my readers will get sick of hearing about it. My mind tells me that they don't want to hear one more story about cancer. The problem is that it is my life. For me, once I've had cancer, even though I've had the good fortune of being a survivor, I never really completely put it behind me. Every time I go for a check-up, I get nervous as the days approach my appointment. Every time the doctor does another biopsy, I have to wait through the excruciating days leading up to the phone call that tells me whether my life can keep moving at its own pace or whether cancer is once again going to interfere with my plans.

But I'm here to tell you that I'm actually one of the happiest people I know. I have decades of recurrent cancers to thank for it.

Say what?

Honestly. I had the fortune of catching mine before it was even precancerous. We kept an eye on it for several years as we watched it go from a benign



Leslie writes both locally and internationally. She lives with three dogs, fish, and her husband's cockatoo whom she's been trying to roast for dinner for the last 33 years. Leslie calls herself a frequent flyer at Sloan Kettering, having survived both oral cancer and breast cancer. She's hoping she will not accumulate any more points.

spot, to precancerous, to malignant. I'm happy because I can share with others and tell them not to miss their biannual dental appointments. I can show them by example how important it is to get checked. Because I went to the dentist regularly, we caught my oral cancer early, and even though it loves me so much that it keeps visiting me, I know enough not to ever miss a check-up. The first malignancy was when I was only 38 years old.

I stopped counting how many malignancies I've had a long time ago, but here's the amazing news: I'm now 58. I get to look in the mirror every single day and see wrinkles...wrinkles! Ya know how happy that makes me?

I try to be grateful for every day I have. Cancer has actually taught me that. It's also given me a sense of humor. Although I wouldn't call myself a "foodie," I would call myself a person who loves eating. I'm not an eat-to-live kind of person. I'm a live-to-eat kind of person. I love my treats as well as my healthy foods. They give me my needed protein, fat, and fiber. But I get a terrible side effect when I eat all the stuff I love. I gain weight. The way I look at it, my pain meds are really no different than my food. I love them because they ease the pain I get from multiple surgeries. Some people complain about the side effects of some of these meds. They make you woozy and they prevent some of your bodily functions from doing their bodily functions, if ya know what I mean. To me, even that's OK because then I have an excuse to sit on the couch and veg out with a big bowl of ice cream, binge-watching my favorite TV shows. They make it so I don't even have to stop for bathroom breaks. And they say that cancer meds only have bad side effects!

Me, I'm gonna keep on writing about cancer. I'm gonna write for the people going through it in hopes that I can remind them that we can survive, and I'm gonna keep writing about it to remind myself of how happy I am to be here to watch my wrinkles, and my waistline, grow!



■ *Continued from page 4, Ask the Survivor*

### **What advice do you have for someone who wants to try the Mediterranean diet?**

I would encourage everyone to try the Mediterranean diet. As with any potential change in your life, it is helpful to have support and to ask your family or find a partner to do it with you. They would not only share the benefits, but you could hold each other accountable and keep focused on making the right choices. Once you have made the decision to change, do it gradually. Start by eating Mediterranean a few days per week and use the remaining days to clean out your refrigerator and cupboards. After that you can increase an extra day per week until it's fully integrated into your life. Allow yourself an indulgence once per week for doing a great job. It's all about being more conscience in the food choices you make.

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### **Patient Support Program Rising Voices**

#### **“Something to Sing About”**

Rising Voices is a lively singing group open to MSK patients, caregivers, and survivors. Available at our Manhattan and Westchester locations, Rising Voices is a free and supportive program sponsored by Integrative Medicine and Volunteer Resources.

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