Bucket Lists and Chemo Brain

Breast cancer and side effects didn't deter Jackie Lantry from life goals: living in France and learning the language.

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I grew up in a tiny American town where everyone looked like me and spoke only English. One day, I heard Julia Child on PBS talking to a famous Parisian baker—in French! I was 12 years old and vowed then and there that I would one day visit France. I took French in high school but lost my elementary ability to communicate soon after I graduated. Fast-forward to my 20s. An art teacher friend with the summer off asked me if I'd like to go to Europe for two weeks. I started packing my bags while still on the phone.

The trip was amazing. I returned to the United States and put "fluent in French" on my bucket list. I took courses here and there, but between kids, jobs, elderly relatives and life in general, my sporadic attempts at French fluency kept getting nudged farther and farther down the list.

As I approached retirement, my bucket list came into sharp focus. I made a plan to escape the cold New England winter and spend some time on the French Riviera. I created a list of cities based on the cost of living and walkability. I signed up for Duolingo and committed to a daily French lesson.

In May 2022, I found a small apartment in Nice, France, available from mid-January to the end of March 2023, and I booked it. I was excited and nervous, not having been out of the United States in years and never for more than a couple of weeks at a time. I considered myself the luckiest person alive.

In June 2022, I had my regular mammogram. Having fibrocystic breasts—characterized by lumpy, ropelike tissue—I always get called back for additional images, sometimes even a biopsy. In early July, they requested an ultrasound. When the tech looked at the image on the screen and said, "I'm going to get the doctor," it didn't concern me at all.

Within 24 hours, I found out I had breast cancer. The next few weeks were a blur of appointments,

including what I call the “Breast Cancer 101” meeting, which lasts about three hours and includes social workers, nurse practitioners, oncologists, radiologists and surgeons.

The only thing I took to the meeting was my calendar, the one with the dates I’d be in France.

“You’re not going to France, Jackie,” the oncologist said. “Not this year and probably not next year either.”

I canceled the apartment and my flights. I stuck my new suitcase in the back of the closet, where I couldn’t see it.

Instead of going to France, I got a portacath, immunotherapy and chemo. I was neutropenic—I had low levels of infection-fighting white blood cells—for 24 weeks. I lost my hair, my fingernails and toenails and 40 pounds. I didn’t have the energy to make my bed. When the chemo was finally finished, I had a bilateral mastectomy. The portacath stayed in so I could continue immunotherapy for another six months.

I kept up Duolingo until chemo brain (or, as the doctor calls it, “chemo-related cognitive impairment”) kicked in. After months of chemo, my brain no longer worked like it used to. Words flew out of my head, vaporizing mid-sentence. I had trouble organizing thoughts and remembering things. Forget maps! Anything with more than two or three simple, predictable steps was out of the question.

I had no sense that this was temporary. Unlike my hair, which had fallen out in clumps but I knew would grow back, I never had that sense with my ability to think. I slid into acceptance of this “foggy” version of who I had been. I was terrified I’d forget to pay a bill or miss an important appointment. I canceled Duolingo and scratched “become fluent in French” off the bucket list.

The flip side of this is that facing cancer also imprinted a clear message: “Do what you want to do in life. Do it now! Don’t wait!” This motivation led to tiny moments of victory, and those resulted in a paradigm shift. I began to see myself as an old tool from the garden shed: rusty but so much better built than anything you can buy today. I needed to clean off the rust, oil it up and allow it the grace to be used again. The old tool had loads more life left in it.

Fast-forward 18 months. I revisited my French fantasy plans. I booked airline tickets, and off I went—chemo brain, be damned—to Nice. It’s small enough to navigate on foot, and almost everyone speaks English, which is great because I could not understand anything anyone said. I

ended the trip in Paris, and if my kids hadn't shown up and taken me by the hand, I'd probably still be wandering, lost in the Paris metro.

Despite my chemo brain, I loved the trip and booked the apartment for the following year. I also signed up for Duolingo again. Occasionally, like a lightning strike, a rusty neuron would fire and connect!

I was braver when I returned to France. Emboldened, I took a class at the local Alliance Française. I filled notebooks and index cards with grammar and vocabulary. My brain still misfired, but the connections were becoming more frequent. It was frightening, intimidating and exhilarating.

One day, at the post office, I did my usual, "Bonjour, je suis désolé. Je ne parle pas français. Parlez-vous anglais?" (Hello, I'm sorry, I don't speak French. Do you speak English?) I was shocked when he said, "Je suis désolé, madame, je ne parle pas anglais." (I'm sorry, madam, I don't speak English.)

I took a deep breath and basically told him that I studied at a school and would try. The conversation went like this (I'll spare you the French and present the broken English):

Me: "I would like mail one box over the United States of America. Is it that I can mail box here?"

Clerk: "Oui, madame."

Me: "Boxes I see down there, they are the box?"

Clerk: "Oui."

Me: "After I fill in my home, box I can return here?"

Clerk: "Oui."

Me: "Merci, monsieur. I return soon, box filled. Thank you for help."

Clerk: “Pas de problème. Madame?”

Me: “Yes, sir?”

Clerk: “Madame, vous parlez français.” (Madam, you speak French.)

I floated back to the apartment and poured myself into studying. Soon, my brain was like a pinball machine, pinging and dinging as more and more neurons connected. The last two weeks of that trip were spent in Paris, where I navigated the subway and buses with little need for help.

When I got back to the United States, I dug out the tattered notebook containing my bucket list and rewrote “become bilingual in French” at the very top.

J’étude tous les jours. Mon objectif est d’atteindre le niveau B-1 avant mes 70 ans (février 2026). Je suis presque sûr d’y arriver!

I study every day. My goal is to become level B-1 by my 70th birthday in February 2026. I’m pretty sure I can do it!

Jackie Lantry is retired and lives in southern New England. After 14 months of treatment, she has no signs of breast cancer and is now on a five-year hormone therapy regimen.

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http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/bucket-lists-chemo-brain-fog-breast-cancer-france-travel-jackie-lantry