

Young Breast Cancer Patient's Self-Exam and Self-Advocacy Lead to Cancer Diagnosis

Gillian McDonald chooses Fred Hutch for care, including participating in clinical trials that led to being selected for proton therapy.

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At 33 years old, Gillian McDonald was diagnosed with rare triple negative stage 3c inflammatory breast cancer after feeling a lump when she did a breast self-exam at home.

McDonald, of Gig Harbor, Washington, has been performing regular breast self-exams since she was 24 after a friend was diagnosed with breast cancer. She has always been in tune with her body and has performed self-exams on the first day of each month. When she felt a lump in August 2022, she scheduled a mammogram and ultrasound. Because she was young and nothing abnormal showed up in the results, her care team was not too concerned. However, McDonald started experiencing burning sensations and sought out another mammogram and ultrasound. The radiologist thought she might have inflammatory breast cancer, a rare subtype, and sent her for a biopsy to confirm her diagnosis.

Her local clinic recommended a treatment plan, but McDonald wanted to go to Fred Hutch Cancer Center to see a team of breast cancer specialists for a second opinion.

"From the moment I met with the breast cancer team, I knew I had to switch my care over," said McDonald. "They got me into the reproductive clinic immediately, delaying chemotherapy only by a week. I am so grateful, because I was able to freeze embryos and will hopefully be able to have children in the future."

"Gillian was such a warrior when I first met her in clinic," said her radiation oncologist, [Janice Kim, MD](#). "Despite her young age, she had maturity and strength beyond her years."

Kim recommended McDonald enroll in a [clinical trial](#) for breast cancer patients that included proton therapy. She thought it was especially important because the cancer was in McDonald's left breast and closer to her heart. Proton therapy can better protect the heart and lungs.

"Dr. Kim's energy and enthusiasm is wonderful," said McDonald. "I felt safe with her. I trusted

her.”

McDonald enrolled in the clinical trial and was randomly selected to receive proton therapy, starting in February 2024, after a mastectomy.

“I think it’s very important to take part in clinical trials and to be part of the research that may lead to a cure,” she said. “I have participated in five clinical trials: two at Fred Hutch and three elsewhere. And I will continue to see if I’m eligible for others. I believe this is how we move medicine forward. It’s been an amazing experience for me. My goal is to have others find my story reassuring and motivate them to look for all forms of treatment, even if it’s new.”

“Gillian’s selfless dedication toward research and clinical trials to find a cure was inspirational,” said Kim. “The study she enrolled in, [RADCOMP](#), will provide much needed information on the benefits of proton radiotherapy. In addition to assessing the success rates of proton radiotherapy in breast cancer treatment, we assess the clinical benefits of cardiac and lung protection from protons.”

After her mastectomy, McDonald was feeling emotionally low. She said it helped her to be in a serene and beautiful setting like Fred Hutch Cancer Center – Proton Therapy, with books and snacks, and to have staff that were welcoming and friendly. McDonald felt her care team was always helpful, recommending creams and offering advice about how to minimize radiation side effects, especially to her skin.

“The level of attention they gave to all patients was very touching,” she said. “It’s a special place. I feel very fortunate that I got to be there.”

McDonald completed a 30-day treatment plan and saw either Kim or [Kylie Kang, MD](#), once a week. The radiation and her nodal surgery affected the range of motion in her left arm, so she sees a [physical therapist](#) who has helped her regain about 85% range of motion and has addressed the tingling, tightness and numbness she had been experiencing. She recently had a follow-up appointment at the proton therapy facility, including an echocardiogram and there appeared to be no damage to her heart from the radiation.

“I can’t stress enough the importance of philanthropy in cancer care,” added Kim. “Whether it’s enrolling in a study as Gillian did, monetary contributions or volunteering time to talk to first-time patients, all these contributions will help us get closer to eradicating this disease.”

Triple negative breast cancer has a higher recurrence rate, but McDonald is not letting that hold her back. She plans to keep living life to its fullest and hopes to have a baby in a few years. She is putting more effort into relationships rather than work and taking the opportunity to reframe her life and focus her health and spending quality time with family, friends and her French bulldog, Sookie.

Part of her reframing has involved better sleep practices, exercising more and embracing a more positive outlook. She’s back to doing activities she did before her cancer treatment, including hula

dancing and weight training, and is considering breast reconstruction options.

McDonald has advice for others going through a similar experience.

“Advocate for yourselves — push for answers and don’t let people dismiss you. Take care of yourself and know your breasts,” she said. “Not every breast cancer has a lump, but check yourself every month. And finally, for younger people, pick a good insurance plan that lets you decide where you want to get care.”

For more breast cancer patient stories, read about [Kathy Gill](#) and [Angela Broderick](#). You can learn more about protons for breast cancer [here](#).

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