Sa mga Dabawenyo, mga lumulopyo sa siudad sa Davao, mga higala ug ka partner gikan sa Tagum City, Davao del Norte ug Compostela Valley, mga bisita gikan sa lain laing dapit sa Pilipinas dako kaayo ang kalipay sa inyong pagpakiguban.

I’m Melina Avila from Tagum City, a mother of three kids – Jason, Shera and JM. My life was simple and confined to my role as wife, mother, government employee and our farm business.

All that changed when cancer struck me in April 2004. I was 36 years old.

I was diagnosed with Infiltrating Ductal Carcinoma, poorly differentiated, Breast Cancer Stage 2A, Estrogen and Progesterone Receptor Positive and HER2Neu Positive. I had a Modified Radical Mastectomy-left side in May 2004. I also had 30 sessions of radiation therapy, and eight sessions of chemotherapy.

Cancer is not in the family so I was confident I would never have cancer. My diagnosis caught me off guard. Didn’t know what to do and where to go. Ang ako ra gyud nga nabal an nga sakit ug makamatay ang cancer. Lisod kaayo kay wala koy kahibalo unsay akong padulngan ng kanus a ra ko mulongtad nga makig uban sa akong bana ug mga anak. Ug sa tinod lang dili pako andam mamatay. Hunahuna nako mamatay nako.

It was like groping in the dark not knowing were I was heading, how long I would live. I wasn’t ready to die, I wanted to live longer, and happily with my husband and children.

I had so many questions in my mind. I was swimming in them. I met a cancer survivor and was excited to hear her answers so I could clear my head and regain my bearings. She said, “hulata lang kung ika pud (wait till you become). Marag gisungog jud ko ato nga adlaw ang sulti pud sa doctor sa akoa, if I were to answer all your questions, it would be like reading a whole book to you..”

That was a frustrating encounter. I thought a patient with first-hand experience would give me comfort. From then on I vowed that I will never be like her! I made a promise to myself to be a good source of information for other cancer survivors. Wala man siguro mawala sa akoa kung isulti nako ang akong naagian.

Asking questions would help me cope. Asking was a good thing.

I attended forums and symposiums on breast cancer. And wherever I went, my family and friends came along. They too wanted out of the dark.

In one of the forums, my oncologist, Doctor Honey Abarquez, was one of the speakers. During the open forum, I had three questions in a row, one for each of the speakers.

The moderator played fair and said that we could only ask one question so that others get a chance. Doc Honey stood up and answered my questions. She also told the moderator not to restrain a patient from asking questions because it’s the reason why they do forums.

It was encouraging that someone advocated for me. That someone recognized that it was important for a patient to learn all she could to become well and to feel she mattered.

I’m grateful she is my doctor. She was and is my patient advocate.

My journey in becoming a cancer patient advocate like Doc Honey began when I met the ICanServe Foundation through the late Alice Orleans. She was the former executive director of the foundation.

I eventually met Kara Alikpala, its founding president. One day, she asked me to visit a patient named Virgie in Tagum City, close to where I live.

The patient’s daughter wrote ICanServe asking for help because depression was eating her mother up.

I tried to convince Virgie to lead a more active life by taking early morning walks. I also told her to improve her diet. She did what I told her with so many eagerness and vigor. I felt the full impact of my growing role as a cancer patient advocate. It was fulfilling.

But it wasn’t easy because suddenly Virgie deteriorated fast. It was disheartening. The first patient who dies on you as a patient advocate is probably the feeling doctors get when their first patient dies.

It was a painful experience. I went back to Doc Honey and she said it was Virgie’s time. I was on a different timetable. She also reminded me that as I would continue to reach out to other patients I had to take care of myself.

Gradually, the experience gave me the courage to face life’s reality. Not just my own mortality but others as well. Besides, there was a lot to look forward to. Life after death is a journey to a better place that knows no pain no worries, no sadness.

I also realized that I wanted to continue taking care of patients. I wanted to encourage more women to seek a doctor sooner, so they catch cancer sooner. That way, I get to save and extend more lives.

I continue to soldier on and was continually given opportunities to help. Kara sent me 3,000 tablets of Tamoxifen for distribution to breast cancer patients.

These tablets served as an avenue in meeting other patients. I met cancer survivors in our locality. We had many common ground and we developed deep friendships.

Indeed, it was comforting to spend time with breast-friends. In December 2005, we decided to band together and form a support group with the simple aim of comforting patients.

The only thing we required from our members was a contagious smile and loving presence.

Every month, we get together, share our experiences and invite newly diagnosed patients to join. We’re always happy when we see each other. Those get-togethers are the highlights of our months! Naa mi kauban nga kanunay nagahandum nga unta third Saturday na kay malipay jud daw kaayo siya kung mag uban mi.

In March 2006, we formally launched our support group and called it the Living Hope Breast Cancer Survivors Club. We launched it by staging a forum. It was like coming full circle. The seeds of my advocacy were planted when I attended my first breast cancer forum.

We were blessed to have the support of the Rotary Club of Tagum Golden Laces and the Bishop Joseph Regan Hospital of Tagum City when we launched our group.

The following month I had the privilege of attending the counseling seminar called HEART conducted by SMILES Support Ng May K and Kahayag Foundation. The training equipped me with knowledge to understand myself and other, and taught me how to deal with patient’s personalities and concerns. Learning the techniques of listening and guiding patients so they are capable of decision making and owning that decision.

In the same year, ICanServe and Avon launched the Promoting Patient Power seminar. It served as my foundation on how to sustain our support group and embark on patient navigation. I shared the techniques I learned with other cancer survivors through seminars and lectures. I also encouraged members to grab the opportunity to learn by attending forums. Information is indeed empowering.

Believe me, Living Hope Cancer Survivors Club, was just my heart’s desire. But now it’s real and it’s working. We’re making a concrete impact. We operate out of each others’ support and resources. Wala mi kuwarta. We are merely equipped with a big heart to meet our desires and wishes of reaching out to others.

We became affiliated with the ICanServe Foundation and became a baby support group of SMILES Support Ng May K where my doctor, Doc Honey was a prime mover. Imagine now, I was partnering with the doctor who was one of those who encouraged me to realize my full potential as an empowered patient. To this day, she is a valuable adviser to me and my group.

These affiliations led to meeting other organizations that helped us realize our goals. The Philippine Society of Medical Oncology lent the services of their doctors for free lectures. Local government units became our partners in some of our activities like free aerobics sa plaza, an activity open also to non-cancer survivors. Also, local radio and TV stations offered us free airtime for our campaigns.

In 2008, we launched the program Reaching Lives with Hope. Many responded to our call to become the Living Hope prayer partners. We provided spiritual support to cancer patients and their families.

Building relationships with patients takes time and effort. And yet it can be simple. It may mean brining fresh juices and fruits to the hospital. During my hospital visits, sometimes, I bring my kids with me, to play instrumental music to entertain the patient. Or sometimes I just sit by the bedside of patients listening to their stories.

My cell phone is open 24 hours to answer questions from patients and their families. I call on them to check if they’re doing well. I also spend time walking and exercising and sometimes doing aerobics with them early in the morning. I and some of our members spend time doing aerobics with the women at the infirmary.

Seeing the women enjoy life warms my heart. I’m especially happy when I see a patient pull herself up, and take a stand of taking care of herself by changing her lifestyle and outlook in life for the better.

What is more gratifying and amazing is when I see these patients start to become partners in our advocacy. They start to take the lead in our activities. It almost feels like raising children and seeing them graduate.

I also appreciate our supportive husband volunteers. Someone who keeps his vows of ‘till death do us part’, and goes all out in caring for an ailing wife. We are lucky to have men like that in our group. They are our cooks and work team during our events and outings.

We also take care of each other by visiting places that put us in tune with nature’s best. We love singing and dancing together. It relaxes us. Kung duol ang Desyembre, busy na magpraktis ug kanta ug sayaw.

But it’s not all happy times. It downs…when someone dies. Everybody is affected by the loss. Unya makahunahuna pa gyod nga ako kaha kanus a kaha ang schedule. Many times I cry when a member dies especially if they die because they went to the wrong doctor or took the wrong medication. I had a friend with breast cancer who died of a broken heart. She was extremely stressed because her husband left her for another girl.

Patient advocates like myself are not exempt from low points and depression. When I get sick, sometimes I feel alone and think no one remembers that I too need care.

Sometimes I’m at wit’s end and I ask myself, “Why am I doing all this advocacy work?” I don’t earn money from it. It’s a lot of sacrifice. Sometimes due to life’s trials, and pain, I feel like quitting.

I’m human too even if I’m a leader of a support group.

I also snap out of self pity when I remember I’m blessed with a supportive family, a circle of Living Hope friends and caregivers who are a text and a call away.

Almost always, a small voice from inside tells me to keep going.

Reaching out to cancer patients is my simple way of expressing my gratitude for an extended life. Gratitude is what gives me the courage to continue – **Living Hope is God’s work, I am only an instrument, a medium in order to accomplish His purpose, and whether I’m here or not, His work must continue.**

So I can’t stop, otherwise, I will lose the purpose of my cancer and derail God’s plans for me. It’s best to just allow Him to take the lead. His plans are always better and He always provides.

I know so because He took care of me when I was diagnosed with cancer in ways I didn’t imagine. He led me to instruments that molded me into being a cancer patient advocate. Even stumbling blocks were useful signs that told me to take a detour to a better option. He gave me friends who shared my ministry of helping patients face the illness with courage and hope. Now we’re a team and a big Living Hope family.

*Let us all be lights to cancer patients so they don’t get lost in the dark. And yes, let’s not get tired of answering the same questions cancer patients may have. If we don’t live to make someone else’s life better, life is not worth living.*

*The fear of death or death itself should not stop us. We must carry on.*

*There is hope in cancer in this life and the next.*

I am Melina Avila and this is my story of hope.