



# STEPHANIE'S BREAST CANCER SURVIVOR STORY

*Stephanie Bolman-Altamirano's journey is one of resilience, advocacy, and love in the face of adversity. As a descendant of both the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, Kul Wicasa Oyate, and the Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara Nation, her life has been filled with many stories and experiences. From her roots as a sixth-generation rancher to her role as an elected tribal council member, it is her passion for health navigation and community advocacy that drove her to public service.*

*In this interview, Stephanie candidly shares her breast cancer survivor story and the struggles she faced while being a rheumatoid arthritis (RA) patient. She offers insights into her decision-making process, the challenges she faced, and the pivotal role of culturally sensitive health care in her fight against cancer as both a survivor and caregiver.*

## **FIRST SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS**

In June of 2023, Stephanie partnered with AICAF during the 5th annual Celebrate Indigenous Life media campaign to honor, support, and raise awareness of Indigenous cancer survivors during National Cancer Survivor Awareness Month. Stephanie used her platform to share her story and offer support to other Indigenous cancer survivors. In December of 2023, we followed up with Stephanie to discuss her journey.



“I think my story is a little bit different because I have the health care and medical background that taught me what to look for. So when I started to feel a little bit of heat and a little bit of what I called stabbing pain, I was a bit concerned”, said Stephanie.

With a background in health care and cytology, the study of cells under a microscope, Stephanie was keenly aware of the signs and symptoms to look for.

Despite feeling concerned, she postponed addressing her health issue until after her daughter's fast approaching high school graduation and her other commitments as a Tribal council member.

“I was scared, yes, but I immediately went into prayer and said, Lord, you got this. I'm not going to address it until after graduation. May 14, 2022, was not only the day my only daughter was graduating but it was also her birthday and we had tons of family arriving to celebrate through the weekend. I was not going to let anything change our plans. So we had a blast and we all celebrated and made awesome memories that weekend. I wouldn't have changed a thing it was perfect. And then it was just a few days later that I had made an appointment and we went and had a mammogram done,” said Stephanie.

## CANCER DIAGNOSIS AND INITIAL RESPONSE

From her medical background and experience in helping community members navigate through their own health care journeys, Stephanie was able to read her pathology report when it came in and understood she tested positive for cancer. Her strong sense of faith kept her grounded through this difficult time and would continue to be a pillar for her to lean on throughout her journey.

During this time, Stephanie decided to seek cancer treatment at Mayo Clinic, bypassing local health care services due to perceived gaps in care and her past experiences navigating the local health care system. She emphasizes the comprehensive care and support received at Mayo, including personalized attention and cultural sensitivity.

“I just felt like I wasn't going to have the bandwidth to navigate through my

own health concerns while receiving care. I wanted to be cared for and not have to struggle with health care professionals who didn't listen to me. And I immediately said, I'm not going to have my cancer services done locally,” said Stephanie.

Her decision to go with Mayo was almost instantaneous. “The moment that I was received in the arms of Mayo, it was just a blessing. I could relax and know that all my fears and concerns would be heard.”

## TREATMENT JOURNEY

Stephanie details her treatment journey from undergoing surgery to subsequent radiology treatments and medication with aromatase inhibitors.





She candidly shares the challenges she faced with medication side effects, particularly due to her pre-existing RA, and her decision-making process regarding treatment options.

“I wanted to be viewed not as a breast cancer patient; I wanted Mayo to view me as a person who has severe rheumatoid arthritis first and who now has cancer. I wanted to be viewed with my whole health picture in mind, breast cancer, we can cure, but we can’t cure rheumatoid arthritis,” said Stephanie, “So immediately Mayo understood that, and I just felt 100% comforted and heard.”

Despite Stephanie’s experience being a nurse, she did not anticipate the difficulty she would face with medications while also trying to manage her RA. She described debilitating pain, which was so severe that she at times had to use a cane, walker and even a wheelchair. Despite trying multiple medications, all have caused severe joint pain for her.

## SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY

Stephanie highlights the importance of support networks, particularly the Native American health care navigators at Mayo Clinic, who provided personalized assistance and addressed cultural needs.

“I reached out to clergy and was told Mayo had designated areas to burn sage if you wanted to. They even gave me a little pouch of sage, and so again, just everywhere I went, I felt as if they had the best care,” said Stephanie.

She also emphasizes the role of online communities in sharing experiences and providing support during cancer treatment.

“For me, it’s important to tell other folks that there is comfort in healing in community—you are not alone. It’s important for folks to reach out and to know who or how to reach out. I wish every organization had Native American health care navigators within their facility, but sadly they’re pretty far and few between. Don’t be afraid to ask

about local support groups, I told my provider at the local Indian Health Center to feel free to give my name out to newly diagnosed patients if she wanted to. There are people in your own community that have gone through it, it is scary, and although each persons journey is unique we can share our experience and comfort each other,” said Stephanie.

“I always remind myself, even when I want to know, “Why me?”, that the Creator puts me where he wants me. I know that the Creator has put me on this path for a reason and that is so I can help others who might also be diagnosed and need someone like me to help them so I can give back and comfort them and also be a voice for them if needed.”

## FAMILY AND CAREGIVING



Stephanie reflects on her experience as both a cancer survivor and a caregiver for her mother, who also underwent cancer treatment during the same time. She discusses the support they gave each other and the significance of navigating health care together.

“These last two years have been challenging, but my mom and I always tell folks that prevention, early detection, and screening saves lives. We’re proof of it. Cancer is big and scary, but if you catch it early, there are positive outcomes,” said Stephanie.

Stephanie’s mother chose to seek cancer treatment from Mayo due to her daughter’s positive experience. Her mother also has a background in nursing and worked for the Indian Health Service.

“At the Survivor Wacipi there were Survivor and Caregiver buttons you could wear, and I had a Survivor button on, and I was just going to wear the Survivor one, and my mom later insisted, “No, you wear the Caregiver one too because you were my Caregiver while going through it yourself. I hadn’t thought of it that way,” said Stephanie.

## FUTURE STEPS

Stephanie shares her upcoming surgery to have her ovaries removed and her considerations regarding future treatment options like Tamoxifen. She emphasizes the importance of quality of life and informed decision-making in her health care journey.

Stephanie continues to be an advocate for her community and helps others navigate their health care journeys when they ask her.



## **American Indian Cancer Foundation®**

**The American Indian Cancer Foundation is deeply grateful to Stephanie for the wonderful and sacred advocacy, support, and love she shares with the community.**

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