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[Top](#) [Resources](#) [Poverty issues](#) [CBCN Interviews](#)

Interview with Deborah Snow

CBCN interviewed Deborah Snow by phone through Dialogue Conferencing. She was speaking from her home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, outside of Halifax. July, 2006.

CBCN: Hello Deborah. Could you please tell us a bit about your background?

DS: Well, I was born in Cape Breton and I am 51 years of age. I came to Halifax when I was 15. My mother died from stomach cancer when I was 10. She was 46 years of age. When I was diagnosed with breast cancer at 47 I found it very difficult knowing what I would have to endure because I remembered my mother going down to nothing. I had two daughters at the time, both under 18 years of age. We were a poor family. I had back surgery when I was 13, and I was already on disability. A social worker told me to, "put my problems on the shelf." Well, I found that impossible to do. Being poor isn't a problem you can just shelve. I felt I was trapped inside of my body and I couldn't say the word cancer without crying. It is only recently, 3 years after getting cancer, that I have been able to talk about it. I was allowed to live for a reason.

CBCN: Could you describe the steps leading up your diagnosis?

DS: Well I was misdiagnosed, actually. I felt a

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[Newfoundland and Labrador](#)
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[Nunavut](#)
[Ontario](#)
[Prince Edward Island](#)
[Quebec](#)
[Saskatchewan](#)
[Yukon](#)



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[Breast Health](#)
[Metastatic](#)
[Rural Women](#)
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[Young Women](#)

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lump and my doctor felt a lump too. We could roll it around like a marble. So she sent me to get a mammogram. The radiologist sent the x-ray to my doctor and said that they saw no indication of cancer. My doctor went on her intuition and sent me for a needle biopsy in August 2002. It turned out I had stage three breast cancer. It was aggressive and they had to remove several lymph nodes as well performing a lumpectomy. The first thing they said to me when I showed up at the hospital was that they didn't have a bed for me.

CBCN: You told us before the interview that you have lived in poverty for most of your life. How did this influence your recovery?

DS: I couldn't afford to live after I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was living off of 385 dollars a month social assistance, and 337 child support to begin with. As soon as my daughter turned 19 they stopped paying me the child support. I got behind on the rent. With sweat coming off his brow because he knew how hard this would be, the landlord evicted us. I moved out onto boat that my friend owned, a 41" Cape Islander. I lived down at the harbor in Halifax right into December. This was during my chemo and I was very ill and completely broke. My daughter who had been living with me had to stay with a friend. When you don't have an address, you don't qualify for social assistance. You become officially homeless. I ate at the Salvation Army dinner truck that stationed itself by the library five nights a week and the volunteers there would give out soup and sandwiches. I find quite often poor people take care of poor people better than the social workers do. When I asked the social worker how I was supposed to survive and go through treatment they told me, "that's how the budget works". Poverty is like another death. It's like cancer. When you spend a lot of time with the homeless you start seeing life through their eyes.

CBCN: Would you mind talking a bit about your treatments? You mentioned before the interview that you owed much of your recovery to the positive influence of a retreat.

DS: My chemotherapy lasted from the end of October 2002 to May 2003. I have difficulty swallowing pills anymore after taking so many every day. They were also giving me medication through an IV. I felt the cold fluid coming up through my veins, and I knew that I was going to have a really tough time. I remembered what my mother went through. Knowing I was going to do this for 6 months, I went hysterical. Soon my hair got dry and brittle and I pulled it out in clumps. I had a hard time talking about this stuff as I went through treatments. All the stress in my life

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[British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health: How Do We Make Health Promotion Good for Women? April 8, 2010](#)

["The People vs. Cancer" - Ontario Speaking Tour with Stephen Lewis, March 24 to April 7, 2010](#)

[Goodman Cancer Centre Public Forum: May 12, 2010](#)

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outside of the hospital made all of this a lot harder to deal with. There were other illnesses in my family at the same time. I was suffering on the inside and didn't want to show my children. I got sicker and sicker and sicker. By December I could feel my soul leaving me. I met with a social worker and told her I was dying inside. She arranged that I go to a retreat at Covenant Place in January. They picked me up, took me away. This was all arranged through the organization called Titz 'n Glitz. I was blessed with this five day retreat. I regained my sanity and found God again.

CBCN: And you found that this retreat helped you regain some perspective?

DS: I went through what you might call a spiritual transformation. For me this involved letting Jesus back in my life; running towards him, and not away. Faith brought life back to my spirit even though my body was dying. The bible makes it very clear how people are supposed to live in the world. You are on this earth to help others and allow them to live. Being at the retreat made me realize that cancer patients can gain strength from each other. I joined Breast Cancer Action in Halifax.

CBCN: What are some changes you would make if you were in a position of power?

DS: Better technology in the medical wards for one thing. For instance I have heard of tomography, [where they take an x-ray of a cross section of the breast]. Maybe if this method of detection had been available to me I wouldn't have been misdiagnosed. More funding for those who are sick. I mean, I knew people who were hitchhiking to their chemo treatments. If I had about another 150 dollars a month I would be able to afford electricity, and I could afford to eat decent food. I would also be able to afford my dogs. People tell me that it's irresponsible for me to own dogs at this stage in my life because I can't afford to take care of them. I respond by saying that if it wasn't for my dogs I would be dead now. If it wasn't for the dogs taking me for a walk every day, I wouldn't have had the motivation and energy to fight the cancer. During my chemotherapy I was given a little dog called Savior. Bless his soul. Sometimes we can find more compassion in animals than we do in other humans. I watched people who didn't have support die. Animals offer the time of day, and the love, that humans often don't. Most people are too busy and caught up in their own lives to care.

CBCN: Could you afford your treatments at least?

DS: To afford my treatment I participated in a clinical trial. I knew the doctors would monitor me better that way, and give me better treatment. There were more resources and support networks offered through this option, which would benefit my daughters. It was an aggressive treatment, though, and it took its toll on my mind and body. I suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome now. My back is also weaker than it was before my treatment. Looking back, there should have been more help available. I couldn't pay bills so now I can't get electricity in my name, even if I could afford it. Once I became homeless it was harder for me to get back on my feet.

CBCN: Thank you very much for recounting some of the hurdles you had to overcome. You sound healthier now. Are you?

DS: My body is getting healthier now, but my mind is tired. My bones and joints aren't the same anymore. My bones ache more than they did before. I don't have any fear of death but I am grateful to be alive. I still have a voice and want to help others if I can. In the hospital I saw many people at various stages of the disease. You don't forget that. It becomes part of your life. We have billion dollars for "war ships" and no "poverty ships". We are all human beings and we are all entitled to life here on this earth. Sometimes politicians forget the value of human life. The whole time I was living in the harbor, I saw all those war ships and heard the talk of war. And now we have one.

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