



We moved to Wandsworth in November 2007 and I joined the gym in January 2008. Being 54, menopausal and overweight I knew I needed the help of a personal trainer to kick start the process and wanted someone tough and who would push me. Looking through the list I saw Mark's bio and by chance met him as he was working out when I was getting a tour of the facilities. I made an appointment for an initial consultation and then committed to two sessions per week feeling encouraged and motivated. I can be very lazy which I think Mark picked up on right away but he wouldn't let me do less than I was capable of.

In April 2008 after discovering a tiny lump under my jaw I was diagnosed with stage 4 follicular lymphoma. I had no symptoms except for the lump and had to undergo a battery of tests. I read about the value of exercise in cancer survival and became more determined. I talked with Mark. My emotions were all over the place and he helped me stay focused as well as pushing me to eat well and exercise. My cancer turned aggressive (clinical name transformed) in July 2008. I then had chemo every 21 days for 6 rounds. I had read how important it was for me to exercise right after the chemo so I'd stop at the gym and get on the treadmill for 30 minutes. I'd then have to avoid the gym because I'd feel weak and nauseous and be susceptible to infections the first week but on day 8 I was back in the gym with Mark 3 times a week. I was bald, weak and scared but Mark was never put off by my baldness or my cancer in any way. He was the opposite...very supportive. He was incredibly perceptive as to how far he could push me. I never got ill during chemo and think some of it was due to my exercise programme. My personal training sessions also helped relieve the stress of having cancer. I slept better. I felt better and I looked better.

Three months later (Feb '09) I had a stem cell transplant and spent a month in hospital. I got myself very fit before the transplant hoping to breeze through. I had a very tough time and when I got home I was incredibly weak finding climbing just 2 steps like climbing Everest. I was shocked at how weak I was. My blood pressure was very low. I had to take 8 weeks off training. I was thrilled but anxious about getting back into the gym in May. Mark started me slowly and it felt like I'd never been to the gym. I got frustrated and discouraged but Mark was always positive and encouraging.

It's now 2 years since my transplant and I am fit and well. I see Mark 3 times a week. Some may view it as an indulgence but I truly feel it's helping me remain healthy and it's a priority. Yes I moan and whinge during our sessions but he takes no notice. I'm fitter now than I was before I was diagnosed. He's got a lovely manner. He's knowledgeable about nutrition, anatomy, injuries as well as exercise. He's a bright guy with a good sense of humour. I feel hugely loyal to him because he has hung in there with me through this terrifying time, pushed me and helped me stay focused on staying fit. A day doesn't go by when I don't know how lucky I am to be alive, fit and healthy and Mark has and does play a vital role in this.

Blanche Symons