

How **CANCER** Changed the Way I View My Influence

*(and brought me to
estate planning)*

BY JEN HOVERSTAD, JD

On March 28, 2018, my life changed forever: I was diagnosed with an aggressive stage three invasive ductal carcinoma (otherwise known as breast cancer). My annual physical in January had gone well: no notable concerns, just a dad-like reminder from my longtime family physician to focus more on plant-based eating. I was 34 years old, just a few weeks shy of my baby's first birthday and my 10-year wedding anniversary to my high school sweetheart. My oldest daughter was 3.5 years old and ready to jump into pre-k in the fall. I was working in-house for a bi-coastal coffee roaster. It was my dream job: traveling, leading an incredible team, and directly advising the founder of the company. And yet, here I was. Staring down the barrel of my own mortality, questioning everything about my life. In my mind, I had two options: 1) Keep this information close to the vest, not allowing other people into my journey, or 2) share it with whoever wanted to listen. I chose the latter.

When we're faced with difficult life circumstances, many of us are afraid of telling too many people about it. What if they ask questions I don't feel comfortable answering? What if people judge me for my situation? What if people talk about me? What if I look ridiculous when I try to tell people what's going on?





But here's the bigger question: What if I can change someone's life by sharing my story? For me, an important consideration was whether, in sharing a story about my unexpected breast cancer, I could help SAVE someone's life?

In a culture where we're dominated by fake photos and scripted reality, we have the opportunity to be real with people—both as professionals who are bound to uphold some of the highest standards and as good citizens. We have the privilege of sharing our own stories on a platform already widely respected in our communities.

A handful of years ago, while working as in-house counsel with a Chick-fil-A franchisee, I took a long look at the word "influence." It means: "the capacity to have an effect on the character, behavior, or development of someone or something." Given my role, I was interacting with employees and customers on a daily basis. As a reminder to myself about the privilege of influencing others, I used my name to create the term Jenfluence. It's now the title of my blog and also the basis of a question I ask myself every day: How am I using my Jenfluence today?

How are you using your influence every day? Even more importantly, are you intentionally casting your influence every day?

Imagine a world where every person intentionally acts to positively impact those around them. Wouldn't that be incredible? As attorneys, we can do this. On a daily basis, you can have an impact on the character and development of those around you. Here are three ways to start right now:

Tell your clients why you do what you do.

Prior to my cancer, I focused on business and employment law, but I pivoted my practice to estate planning and elder law after my diagnosis. Through cancer, I realized the importance of planning for the unexpected, and I wanted to help others do the same. I tell all of my clients about this part of my life—my "why." We don't get too involved in my story, but I want them to know why I feel passionate about the work I do for them.

Similarly, my colleague tells the story of the difficulties he experienced in attempting to administer his grandmother's estate. He saw firsthand how important a solid estate plan was for the family, and every day, he works to make sure his own experience isn't replicated for any of our clients.

By telling our clients why we do what we do, we make a personal connection. We're not just there to do a job: We have a greater purpose in our work, and that message resonates with people.

Give time back to your community in ways that are meaningful to you.

When people find out you're an attorney, everyone asks for your time. But you have the power to identify the community organizations that are most meaningful to you and to focus your efforts on those groups. When you feel connected to an organization, you'll find it easier to tell your story alongside the story of the group, which will make it easier to share both your experience as well as the history of the organization.

For me, I've chosen to donate a large portion of my time and resources to the YMCA. I've been an off and on member of the YMCA for nearly my entire life, but when I was

diagnosed with cancer, I had the opportunity to participate in the “LIVESTRONG at the Y” program, which is offered free to cancer patients around the country. It’s easy for me to share why I have now chosen not only to be a member of the Y but also to serve on the board and donate my time to the group. I know what they did for me, and I want to ensure they can continue to do the same for others. When you’re spending your free time in a way that not only benefits those around you but also aligns with your own values and experiences, it’s easy for people to catch your enthusiasm and passion.

Use a social media platform to share the ins and outs of your story.

For some reason, our profession as a whole doesn’t see the value in social media. But chances are, we don’t see the value because we aren’t using it correctly.

Let me give you some permissions: You don’t have to be present on every platform. We don’t have to share what we eat or what



we’re doing at every second of the day. What we should be sharing are our stories. Our passions. Our “why” in life. For me, that means walking people through my cancer treatment. I give people a firsthand look at what it’s like to tackle cancer while being a mom and an attorney. Now that my treatments are completed, I’m showing them how I’m trying to pursue a healthy lifestyle: what I’m doing in the gym and which organizations I’m partnering with to donate my time and money. I’m giving them a glimpse of the real me. And the best part? Now, when I receive referrals from social media, people feel like they already know me, and we’re able to build a more immediate rapport.

While these are three tangible ideas for consistently sharing your story, exerting “influence” requires that you also consider the small, everyday moments of life: Opening the door for a fellow store patron; saying thank you to your co-worker for the simplest of tasks; being patient with the new cashier at your favorite fast-food spot; or providing an unsolicited compliment to a complete stranger. These interactions have just as great—if not greater—impact on those with whom you come into contact.

Your actions matter. Your story matters. Your influence matters. How you share yourself with others truly has a bigger effect than you’ll ever know. I challenge you today to reflect on your own influence and to find ways to create positive change in the lives around you. 🌍

