

Lung Cancer Diagnosis and Annabelle Gurwitch

Annabelle Gurwitch:

These drugs will stop working in a certain amount of time. And whether I survive, and how I survive is entirely dependent on lung cancer research.

Diane Mulligan:

Advances in lung cancer treatments over the last few years have made it possible to live with lung cancer for years after diagnosis, and each person learns how to live with lung cancer differently. Some even find humor in their journey. I'm Diane Mulligan.

Sarah Beatty:

And I'm Sarah Beatty. Today, on the Living with Lung Cancer: Hope with Answers Podcast, a conversation with Annabelle Gurwitch, an actor, author, podcast host and all around very funny person. Who's just finding her feet after a whirlwind COVID year, that included a shocking lung cancer diagnosis. You'll hear how she's adding lung cancer patient advocate to her long list of projects.

Diane Mulligan:

Lung cancer is a tough topic. It's a disease that affects patients, families, friends, coworkers, but first it's a disease that affects people. The Hope with Answers: Living with Lung Cancer Podcast brings you stories about people living, truly living with lung cancer. The researchers dedicated to finding new breakthrough treatments and others who are working to bring hope into the lung cancer experience.

Sarah Beatty:

Annabelle Gurwitch is funny. She can make you laugh about her car being repossessed, tell you wild stories about her adventures and house sharing, and even make you see the lighter side of a lung cancer diagnosis.

Diane Mulligan:

It takes a talent for storytelling and a sense of humor like hers, to explain how she's learning, how to live with a lung cancer diagnosis, including her new found advocacy for naps.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

Well, hello. I am doing well on this day. Just to put things in perspective. Since I was diagnosed with lung cancer, I do find that I have a little bit less energy because of the medication that I'm taking, but I'm going to be heading for a nap after this, after we have our conversation and I encourage naps. I am also an advocate for besides lung cancer research funding napping. Napping is a new cause of mine.

Diane Mulligan:

I think napping is a wonderful thing and all the research shows us that it's a wonderful thing. So good for you. We're going to get through this talk and have some fun, and then it'll be time for your nap. That's a great thing. So let's get started. Tell me how you were diagnosed with lung cancer? What's your lung cancer story?

Annabelle Gurwitch:

So Diane, during the beginning of COVID, I was sheltering at home in my home in Los Angeles, awaiting my a child, Ezra, now 23, to graduate college. COVID class of 2020 and they graduated. Because of travel restrictions, they were sheltering in place in New York. Then they came back home to Los Angeles and this was in May 2020. They came home and we were living in different parts of the house, you know, masked and sort of scurrying away from each other. We went to get our COVID tests so that we could combine our households. And just a funny series of events happened.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

We went to Dodger Stadium to get the city tests and the lines were too long. Tried to get testing through my healthcare provider. They weren't doing testing at that moment, unless you have symptoms. I didn't have symptoms. Neither of us had symptoms, but I did have this little cough that I mentioned on the phone to my GP, I said, "I thought it was acid reflux and that I wasn't paying much attention to it." Then we went to a random urgent care center to get a COVID test. When they did their screening, they said, "Do you have any symptoms?" And I said, "I have this little cough. It's nothing. I'm sure it's acid reflux." And for some reason, this doctor would not let it go, and he suggested that I have an x-ray and I was sure that this was like an upsale, like at a cosmetics counter. Like they've got to get you not, you've come for the mascara. They sell you the moisturizer.

Diane Mulligan:

Absolutely.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

But my child, and this is important because I wasn't noticing this, my child said, "Mom, you know, you do cough a lot." And that was interesting because I didn't know that anyone else had noticed it, because I had been alone, right. Also, sheltering alone. I'm a single person at this point in my life. So because my



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kid said that too, I agreed to the x-ray, get x-rayed, doctor comes back in and says, "Oh, they're fine." And we leave.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

We're on the freeway home. My car breaks down. We're on the side of the freeway. AAA is not coming because it's a pandemic. And I'm like, "Oh my God. That's like we're in zombie apocalypse." The phone rings and I put it on speakerphone, because I don't know who it is. And it's the doctor from the urgent care saying, "I read the wrong x-ray, you have a mass on your lungs." My kid and I are both hearing this at the same time, which you would never want to do.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

That moment, my life changed. I didn't know how it was going to change, but that took a series of three months to do further testing versus, because it was like maybe it's pneumonia. These spots on your lungs are these concerning masses. And then, once they said they found something, there's a tumor, the size of a Clementine. Well, you know, when something goes citrus, you're in trouble. And a biopsy and suddenly a diagnosis of stage four cancer. I could not have been more shocked because other than my little cough, I exercise every day, I feel like I'm in really good health. I look like I'm a healthy person. I think that we all judge some of our health based on how we look. That was a completely shocking and transformational moment. The day I first got that news of stage four cancer.

Diane Mulligan:

I can hear the shock in your voice even now, and to be on the side of the road with a broken down car after going through all of this, right? So how did you, how did you even handle the diagnosis? I mean, emotionally, what went through your head?

Annabelle Gurwitch:

I think like everyone who has this experience, and of course I'm not the only person, this is a very human experience. I have some cells that went rogue, and that's how I think about it. One of the hardest times in my life was the three months where I didn't know what I was facing. I have to say there was, at least some relief as weird as that sounds in the diagnosis. But of course the diagnosis was so much worse than I expected. But that was at least not knowing was such a terrible time. During that time, my car was reposed. I had lost track of the payments because I was just treading water and being a human, just trying to get up every day. And I was working, I was editing this new book. It was just an absolutely terrible time. It was like, I felt like I was underwater just trying to just catch my breath every day. It was really, and also COVID on top of it all.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

It was so hard not having the comfort of friends and family around. I am really lucky. My sister, after this diagnosis came out during COVID, quarantined, and then stayed with me. I always say it was a little

terrifying. She said the scariest words to me. She said she was coming out and she had a one way ticket. And I thought, Oh my God, that's how you know something's really serious when your family member gets a one way ticket.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

You know, it's just a transformational moment in life. And once you can breathe and start thinking, "What am I doing with my life?" Then it is a time when you feel you need to reckon with how you're living, and what you're doing and as much as one can. What I didn't realize when I was diagnosed, because it had been not on my radar at all, was this growing epidemic of lung cancer in non-smoking women. I am determined now that since I am a writer and a storyteller, and I can share my story, my sharing, my diagnosis, and how I'm living with it and the incredible tight rope I'm walking now, because I get to have the life I'm having right now because of the drugs that were developed in the last five years. I happen to have the EGFR Mutation, which responds to a medication that allows me to continue a pretty normal life, except for the extra napping.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

These drugs will stop working in a certain amount of time and whether I survive and how I survive, what kind of quality of living I have is entirely dependent on lung cancer research funding. So one of the ways I intend to spend my life now is by being an advocate and hopefully an advocate with humor, which is what I do for a living. I'm very dedicated to that now, as you know, if you read my reading, I've used my writing for comedic purpose, but also for activism, because I'm just a citizen of the world. I'm very ordinary person. I always think that the things I'm going through are reflective of things other people are going through. Nothing that's happening in my life is, I didn't swim across the English channel. I'm not somebody who's made discoveries are going to change the world. I'm just a person, and now, I'm a person living with lung cancer. And so I can write about that experience and help. Someone said, "Are you trying to raise awareness?" I said, "God, no, I'm just trying to raise money."

Diane Mulligan:

My question to you is, were you really surprised when you learned about this increase in lung cancer? When we're talking about young women who are never smokers, was that the most surprising thing you learned? Or was it more something you learned about yourself? Because this came out of the blue, which it does for so many lung cancer patients.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

Yes. It's so surprising because we have many cancers on our radar and other illnesses, and things that can happen, but this was not on my radar at all. And why is that important? It's important because the nagging cough that I had, it's debatable, but I believe had I known that this was a potential symptom of lung cancer in women in particular, this would have spoken to me non-smoking. This would have put it on my radar in the same way that I think about diabetes, that I think about other chronic illnesses that I

am very attuned to my health in relation to, and breast cancer and the issues that have gotten more attention. And not that we want everyone to be living in mortal terror every moment, but knowledge is power. I am also really interested in this idea that my child noticed to my coughing, if other people in my life had been aware of that as well, someone might have said, "You know, this is an issue."

Diane Mulligan:

The other thing, I think is that none of us have time to be sick. So a nagging cough, if it's not impeding what you're doing on a daily basis, I'll get to it later. I mean, it's not, you know, you're not going after really saying, "what is this?" So that's very interesting, right?

Annabelle Gurwitch:

But this idea that we're going to cure ourselves or that we have agency where we don't necessarily have that. And for instance, I felt I look healthy, I feel healthy. So paying attention to the small symptoms, it can be extremely unreliable way of thinking about health is how you look. Again, we don't need to all live in fear of 24 hours a day, but we should follow up on what we do know are symptoms. I just didn't know. So we need to know that a cough that continues for quite a long period of time, it's worth having that attended to. Of course, one of the things is you know, will be really helpful. And we can only have this with more funding is if diagnostics are improved, on the horizon are a saliva test and a nasal swab test for lung cancer. That will be transformational because we will be able to get diagnosed without the lugubrious and costly expense of scans and biopsies. When that day comes and it can't come soon enough, and it will only come with funding, then this will be more actionable what I'm talking about.

Diane Mulligan:

Absolutely. We couldn't agree more.

Diane Mulligan:

It's amazing. Annabelle Gurwitch is such a delightfully funny person to talk to. Even when talking about lung cancer. She was working on her new book, *You're Leaving When? Adventures in Downward Mobility*, during her lung cancer diagnosis.

Sarah Beatty:

You'll hear About her new book and how she's planning to use her voice as a lung cancer patient advocate, next.

Diane Mulligan:

Are you enjoying the Hope with Answers: Living with Lung Cancer Podcast? Consider making a donation to help LCFA produce this resource for patients or anyone seeking answers, hope, and access to updated treatment information, scientific investigation and clinical trials. Just text [lcfamerica](http://lcfamerica.org) to 41444 to join in this important fight.

Sarah Beatty:

You may know Annabelle Gurwitch's work from television, the stage, her books, and now as the host of a Tiny Victories Podcast. She's smart and funny in all of her work, and that holds true. Now, that she's adding lung cancer patient advocate to her growing list of projects.

Diane Mulligan:

I talked To Annabelle about how she managed to wrap up production on her new book called, You're Leaving When? Adventures and Downward Mobility. At the same time she was going through a lung cancer diagnosis.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

Yeah. This diagnosis rocked my world and also disturbed my sort of brain function. I was just having a really big time, tough time making decisions and things were falling through the cracks. My car was reposed because I wasn't paying attention to whether or not things were coming out of the auto pay of my account. I just couldn't get food into the house. I mean, it was just hard to get up every day. It was so crazy in my brain, was just really tough.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

But writing is my job like for many people, I think that if we can work, and many of us are living with this lung cancer as a chronic illness now, we want to work. And so it's just my job. So then how do I do that? Well, I had a lot of help from, not only my editor at the publishing house who I didn't tell. I mean, it got a little sticky. I almost lost this contract because I didn't want to tell them what was going on. There's just so much fear when you get diagnosed with cancer of how people are going to react.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

I guess that's another reason why I've come forward. People can see me at this point in my health is that, I'm a functional person. I think we have to normalize in a sense living with chronic illness. Not because that's a good thing but because it's just happening. There are plenty of us who have chronic illnesses who can be very engaged and really productive citizens. Our lives are worth the accommodations towards this health issue. And I had help and then other friends who are writers, I enlisted people's help, because I just felt I lost some of my ability, one of the things that to make decisions.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

I think one of the things that is very shocking about an unexpected diagnosis of any profound chronic illness, including cancer, is that I felt if I didn't know I had cancer or suspect that, how do I know anything? It disrupted my sense of competency and decision-making. So if I could be so stunned to not know the state of my own health now, of course, that's an expectation that is rather unreasonable, but I didn't realize that at this time, because things that are happening at a cellular level aren't necessarily detectable to us. But we have a fallacy of thinking that a very close friend said when I was going through

the diagnosis period. "Well, you know your body better than anyone. Do you think you have cancer?" Like, "No, first of all, as it turns out, I don't know my body better than anyone and nobody really does. And I know that, I know I don't." How can I answer that question? Right? But we've heard these kinds of things in, and it just not, it's just gobbledygook.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

That made it hard for me to do my work, this feeling of "I'm so wrong about my own health. What else am I wrong about?" And I got into just a terrible state of mind. I crawled out of that. I still can have that. I'm still working on that though, that trying to re-establish my habits, my work habits. It is still a challenging and I still feel affected, and I'm still doing what many people in our community and in the community at large are doing who have chronic illnesses, and people who have autoimmune illnesses, as you're trying to balance your known life versus a new, maybe even slightly compromised life. You're trying to balance your life in the present versus the future trajectory of an illness that is known, a path is known, although it may change with future science. I think balancing all these things are a profound way challenging, and have a really large effect. And it is a language that we are all developing together.

Diane Mulligan:

Absolutely. I mean, what's your balancing your life right now is your health, your work, then you add lung cancer patient advocate on top of that. It takes a lot of motivation to get out there and talk about this. Especially when, as we started, when you're done you're going to take a nap because it's exhausting. So tell me, how do you stay motivated? How do you keep, what is it about talking about lung cancer research about funding for lung cancer that keeps you going, so that you keep doing these types of interviews and that you keep talking about this? When I'm sure there are some days when you just do want to just get into bed and let the world go by for a while.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

I feel that first of all, one of the reasons I write, and this is my fifth book now, and I write about my life in the larger cultural zeitgeist, and all of my books are about examining tropes that we live with that I think, "Do we really? Do we? How do we?" Part of this, *You're Leaving When? Adventures and Downward Mobility*, has to do with identity and a certain time in your life, when the roles and the identity that you have played in your own life, and your family's life, in your community's life were changing. For me, I was no longer a wife. I was no longer a mother and my daily motherhood activities. I had been caregiving for my parents, they had passed, I was no longer a daughter in that sense. And I was really trying to carve a new life for myself.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

Everyone has their own iterations of that, but my life has been purpose-driven by telling stories that I hope will be both entertaining and empathy generating. And as such, I'm a very privileged, I've been

privileged that I've been able to even in reduced amounts of money. And even though downwardly mobile, I've been able to tell these stories, and this is what I get up in the morning to do.

Annabelle Gurwitch:

I feel one thing about this diagnosis is at the same time is it can be exhausting. I also feel it's a motivator although there's a ticking clock, a little bit of a ticking clock there, and I want to use my time well. I want to be a positive contributor to society. I mean, that is a very important thing. I think when you get a diagnosis like this, if you are in a position where you are able to say, like Mary Oliver asked us in a poem, "What will I do with this one wild and beautiful life?" You know, if you are privileged enough to have that opportunity to ask that question and an answer appears, which says, "Keep working, keep doing the work you're doing." And I think it's important to answer the call. That gives me energy when I'm able to do that, that gives me energy and that's a life worth living.

Diane Mulligan:

We are so grateful to Annabelle Gurwitch for spending some of her day with us to share her lung cancer journey, and talk about how she balances everything she's doing, podcast host, author, and now, lung cancer, patient advocate.

Sarah Beatty:

She's another inspiring example of someone who's truly living with lung cancer and putting her sense of humor to work as an advocate. Join us again next time on the Hope with Answers: Living with Lung Cancer Podcast. Thanks for listening.

Diane Mulligan:

Make sure to subscribe to the Hope with Answers: Living with Lung Cancer Podcast. You'll be notified every time a new episode is available. So visit us online at lcfamerica.org, where you can find more information about the latest in lung cancer research, new treatments, and more. You can also join the conversation with LCFA on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.