Life

LESSONS

When Kathy Bates was diagnosed with lymphedema after her double mastectomy in 2012, she anticipated the worst. Having seen loved ones suffer from the disease that affects over 10 million people in the U.S. alone, Bates had witnessed its impact firsthand. “It’s like putting a cement cast around one of your legs and saying you have to live like that. Imagine what that would do to your social life, your energy level, your emotional stability? I was very afraid,” she says.

The reality of her condition hit hard at her first costume-fitting post-diagnosis. “I started to weep,” she says. “I was wearing men’s shirts because they were the only kind of shirt I could get my arm into.” The costume designer cleared the room and revealed she, too, suffered from the same condition. “It made me feel better to know that I had a sister there—I wasn’t alone,” says Bates.

Her fear has since turned to anger when realizing that the majority of patients do not have access to the same effective treatment that she now receives, which keeps her symptoms at bay. “Doctors spend anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes during medical school talking about the lymphatic system,” says the actress. “My anger is not for myself; it is for the lack of knowledge on doctors’ parts in terms of their training. It seems like it would be a relatively simple problem to fix so that people aren’t going years without being diagnosed.”

Never one to sit idly by, Bates has taken on the role as spokesperson for the Lymphatic Education & Research Network (lymphaticnetwork.org) and focuses her efforts on living life to the fullest. “I survived ovarian cancer. I survived breast cancer. I just feel like I’ve been given a second chance, and I want to live every day,” says Bates. “Time is the most valuable thing any of us have.”