

Portrait of HOPE

Making Strides of Chicago | 10.5.24 | Solider Field | MakingStridesWalk.Org/ChicagoIL



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This change of plans makes me feel that I have a new chance at life. I received this devastating diagnosis only three years ago, but the continuous support I've received has encouraged me to continuously have hope that I will be living and enjoying life for a long time.

Savannah Mobley, Thriver

My metastatic breast cancer diagnosis came out of left field. During the COVID pandemic, I was pregnant with my second son and experiencing severe back pain. Throughout my pregnancy, I raised my concerns to physicians, but the assumption was that my body was adjusting to a growing baby and that's what was causing the pain. All of my fetal scans and lab work looked perfect, so it didn't seem like there was anything to worry about.

In January 2021, when my youngest son was two months old, the pain eventually became so bad that I had issues walking. I couldn't leave my house, so I had friends and family coming in to help my husband care for my infant and 2-year-old. After not making any progress, I made my way to a spine specialist who immediately ordered an MRI. The MRI confirmed a compression fracture in my T-5 vertebrae and the doctor asked for my husband and I to come in immediately.

They let us know that they had found spinal fractures in the MRI but also found hundreds of lesions in my bones from the base of my skull into my hips. The presentation aligned with metastatic breast cancer, but they wanted to admit me for additional testing to confirm. Testing showed a primary tumor in my right breast and additional tumors in my ribs and liver. A biopsy revealed that I had Her2+ metastatic cancer.

While a metastatic diagnosis at age 33 is not ideal, my oncologist was positive about my prognosis due to the amount of research and effective treatment options for Her2+. After nine cycles of chemotherapy and immunotherapy, I was stable enough to stop chemo and move forward with only immunotherapy.

My family relocated to Chicago from Austin, TX in June of 2022. With that move, I was able to access more information and treatment options. I was even able to have a spinal fusion in early 2023 to repair three compression fractures that wouldn't heal. This fully relieved my pain and allowed me to feel active again, which I wasn't sure was possible.

Originally, I was told that I would be on treatment for the rest of my life, which weighed heavily on my mental state. The amount of time and energy it takes to manage a chronic illness can be overwhelming. Thanks to the data, I had the right resources to ask more questions about where I am at in my medical journey, and consider a different approach. After a few tests, we confirmed that the cancer is completely stable. Because of this, my oncologist is supportive of pausing the targeted therapy and proceeding with PET Scans & Tumor marker testing every three months.

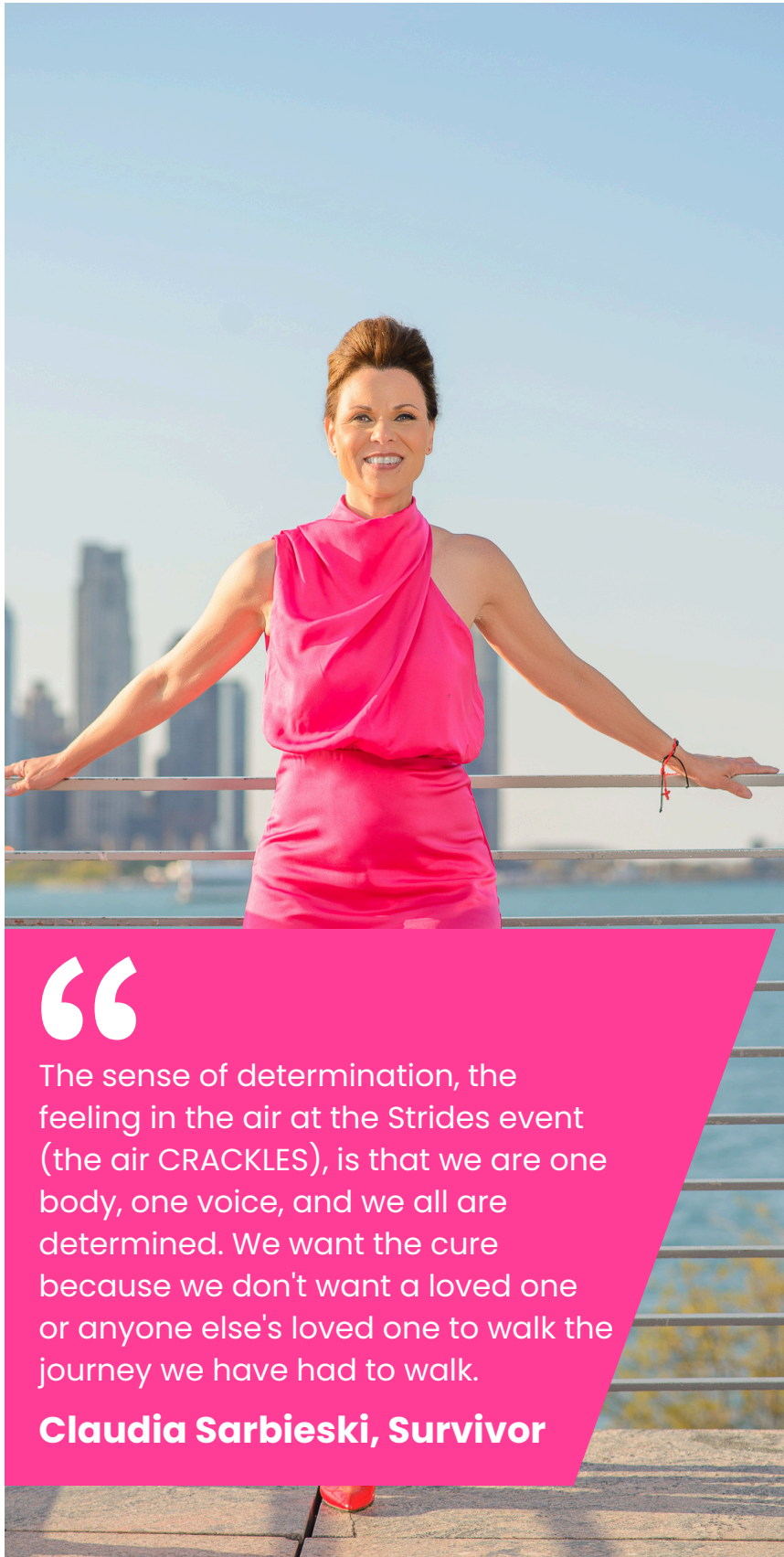
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The sense of determination, the feeling in the air at the Strides event (the air CRACKLES), is that we are one body, one voice, and we all are determined. We want the cure because we don't want a loved one or anyone else's loved one to walk the journey we have had to walk.

Claudia Sarbieski, Survivor

The first time I remember hearing the word cancer, I was five years old; my beloved grandfather had been diagnosed with colon cancer and had been told he had six months to live. What I learned about the word cancer from this young age was cancer was something to be feared.

In 2018, after a routine mammogram, I learned what my grandpa must have felt when my doctor called me and said, I am sorry, but you have breast cancer. I had four children: 16, 17, 27, and 30. What flashed before my eyes? Is my son going to lose his mother just as I had lost mine when I was 30? Will I not watch my sons graduate high school? Watch any of the kids get married? Hold a grandchild? And the thing I dreaded most was not growing old with the love of my life, Pete.

What followed is what most cancer patients and families go through surgeries, so many I stopped counting, treatment, and fear.

In the early stages of my diagnosis, I went googling even though my doctors told me not to, and I was blessed enough to find cancer.org, the American Cancer Society site.

I got lost, searching for information I had hesitated to ask in front of my husband and daughter at the doctor's office. I found a safe place. I came across a section that said, join us in the fight, sign up, and lead a team. And I thought to myself, this is how I am going to fight back, raise money, show people that people are searching for the cure, giving much-needed support to those who most need it, and it was all being done by the ACS. I called my family, knowing this would take more than I might have. My daughter and husband rallied the troops and started the Walking Warriors 2018 annual fundraiser.

That first year, I knew my family walked because of me, but we were joined by close friends, "my sisters and brothers," all of whom have been either diagnosed themselves or had a loved one diagnosed or lost to this dreaded disease.

Each year, we add team members newly diagnosed and proudly walk with the names of loved ones battling or warriors lost on our backs.

There are tears of joy sometimes because treatment is done, tears of sorrow because someone we love did not survive, and laughter at how we as a team come together and show cancer you will not defeat us.

The sense of determination, the feeling in the air at the Strides event (the air CRACKLES), is that we are one body, one voice, and we all are determined. We want the cure because we don't want a loved one or anyone else's loved one to walk the journey we have had to walk. However, I have learned with my pink sisters that I am never alone and will do my best never to let someone I know battling be alone.



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I made a vow, that I would help others, share information, and do my part to encourage others who are going through a battle with not only cancer but any difficulties in life. I vowed to be a beacon of light and strength.

Christiana Russell, Survivor

2019 started off like any other year, I wrote out my goals, plans and all the things I planned to accomplish. I never thought that Cancer and Covid-19 would be part of those plans.

November 19th, 2019, I was diagnosed with HER-2 Positive Stage 3 Metastatic Breast Cancer. It was said to be an aggressive and invasive form of carcinoma. I was devastated and emotionally bereft. During that same week, my mother-in-law passed away and I decided to keep the news from friends and family until after her funeral. It was difficult to carry that burden alone.

I was immediately scheduled for a port insertion and my chemotherapy treatments began December 20th, 2019. It was a Christmas that I will never forget, I was weak and sick and miserable.

Shortly after, the world was shut down due to the global pandemic of COVID-19. My family could not come and visit, my friends could not come and visit, and I had to go through all my treatments and procedures in isolation due to the strict protocols in place for COVID-19. It was a lonely & isolating experience, but it was also a time of self-rediscovery.

I took the time to sit with myself and learn more about me and what events led me to this point. I completed the genetic testing to determine if I had the BRCA gene so that my husband and I could make informed decisions regarding our 2 daughters. Thankfully, I did not have the gene. My cancer was the result of “environmental factors and stress”. It was after hearing those words – that I had a monumental epiphany. I made God a promise, that if he would allow me to survive and live through this ordeal, then I would live my life as a new woman.

I made a vow, that I would help others, share information, and do my part to encourage others who are going through a battle with not only cancer but any difficulties in life. I vowed to be a beacon of light and strength.

In 2021, I launched my fashion, beauty & lifestyle blog and social media pages – Christy’s View. Christy’s View is not only a platform for fashion; it is a narrative of empowerment, versatility, and sustainability in style. I intertwine my love for fashion, lifestyle, and beauty with profound personal insights. I invite my audience to partake in my colorful world, drawing inspiration from my Nigerian heritage and my personal journey of battling breast cancer. My goals are to inspire, uplift and encourage and be a beacon of strength and advocacy in the fight against cancer.

In 2022, I launched Lola’s House Chicago, an online resource to offer support through resources and information to underserved women in the Chicago area. I look forward to being a part of the American Cancer Society Community as a Portraits of Hope Ambassador and use my voice and platform to bring awareness.



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The supportive comments from family, friends, and my network served as a source of motivation during my darkest days. I'm sharing my story to encourage others to prioritize their mammograms. Everything else CAN wait!

Rumaisa Khawaja, Survivor

It was May of 2021. We had just sold our home in Iowa and were packing up and moving to California. When laying down to go to bed, I noticed that there was a rock-hard feeling located on the right side of my breast, about the size of a gumball. My husband had suggested I get it checked for peace of mind. We both assumed it was a cyst. I had been so focused on coordinating our move, I put it off for two months. Finally, I went in to see my OBGYN for a breast exam. She suggested that I schedule a mammogram right away to get a closer look. During my mammogram, it was suggested that I get a biopsy done.

Roughly two days later, I accompanied my mother for her 6-month mammogram checkup. At the age of 77, she had been managing HER2-positive breast cancer, with a tumor the size of a golf ball measuring 9 cm. Ironically, it was on this very visit that I received the phone call. I received a diagnosis of Stage 2 triple-negative breast cancer, with a tumor measuring 2 cm. I spent the next 48 hours thinking about my then 4-year-old daughter and my husband. "Will I get to watch my baby grow?" "Is this my story"? I started leaving voice notes in my phone for my daughter to listen to when she grew older. I was in pure disbelief.

Our move to the West Coast was put on pause, and we moved to Chicago to live with family during my treatment. My daughter started kindergarten, and I leaned on my new community. I asked for help, asking mothers from my daughter's class for play dates after school, as my husband was working, and I knew I would be late for pick-up coming back from my chemo appointments. This was during the Pandemic, as I could not have anyone with me at my appointments. I was navigating my "new" appearance, wearing wigs and hats year-round, coloring in new eyebrows and showing up each day with makeup on to try and keep some kind of normalcy in my life.

I strongly believe in focusing on what I CAN do, rather than what I cannot. It was time to put into practice the principles I teach and coach others on. I started looking at my infusion days as my "Self-Care Healing Days." I took more baths and listened to my body each day. Losing my hair, going through 16 rounds of chemo, surgery, radiation, and then chemo pills all felt like going to war with my own body, but I chose to countdown how far I have come, rather than what I had left to do. Sharing my journey on social media became a vital outlet for me. The supportive comments from family, friends, and my network served as a source of motivation during my darkest days. I'm sharing my story to encourage others to prioritize their mammograms. Everything else CAN wait!



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Never underestimate your strength. You are stronger than you know. And to Dr. R, I will always be grateful. You saved my life.

Lindsey Johnson, Survivor

When I was 33, I began seeing a new physician, Dr. R. After reviewing my family history, she recommended that I consider early screenings for breast cancer. While her concern was understandable, I didn't feel any urgency. After all, I was only in my early 30s! This could wait. So, I promptly ignored her advice.

Flash forward to my next appointment, and Dr. R asked if I had started working with a high-risk clinic. Feeling sheepish, I admitted that I hadn't, but I promised to make an appointment as soon as I left her office that day.

Flash forward another year... you can guess what happened. It took me two and a half years to finally follow my doctor's advice.

Two and a half years of thinking, "I'm too young," "This isn't a priority," and "I'll get around to it." Without Dr. R's persistence, who knows where I would be today. Thus began the journey of early screening: mammograms, ultrasounds, and breast MRIs spread throughout the year. Often, I wondered why I was even bothering with it all. It felt like overkill—until the day it didn't.

At 38, a lump suddenly developed in my right breast, seemingly overnight. The clinic quickly scheduled me for an ultrasound, and that's when I received the news: I had cancer. The cancer was aggressive, but fortunately, it had been caught early. My mind swirled with all the "what ifs."

What if I had never gone to see Dr. R?
What if I had kept ignoring her advice?
What if...

The answer is clear: I might not have had the lump checked, given my youth and good health. The cancer would have progressed unchecked, and my story would have been a cautionary tale, not one of hope.

Thankfully, that's not how this story ends. June 28th, 2024, will mark one year since my final surgery. Following a double mastectomy, four rounds of chemotherapy, reconstructive surgery, and medically induced menopause, I can confidently say that I'm happy and healthy.

This past year has revealed my incredible strength and courage. Now, I aim to use that strength to support others. My story isn't unique, but I hope that sharing it will make others feel less alone in their journeys.

Never underestimate your strength. You are stronger than you know. And to Dr. R, I will always be grateful. You saved my life.



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Through my journey, I've learned that resilience knows no bounds. My battle with breast cancer may have been unexpected, but it has transformed me, instilling within me a newfound appreciation for life's fragility and the resilience of the human spirit.

Lindsey Twardak, Survivor

At the age of 32, in the midst of planning my wedding and eagerly anticipating the start of my new life with my husband, life took an unexpected turn when I received the diagnosis that no one ever imagines receiving: breast cancer. I never thought that Breast cancer would be part of my story, yet there it was, challenging every plan I had laid out for my future.

Within days, we learned that my tumor had already grown to over 8cm and spread to several lymph nodes. I could not reconcile how this disease had been growing inside me when I thought I was completely healthy. Determined to preserve my hopes for the family I had dreamt of, I decided to undergo fertility preservation before embarking on the daunting journey of chemotherapy, followed by multiple surgeries, radiation, and now – years of endocrine therapy and targeted treatment to keep me cancer free.

As I navigated through the whirlwind of treatments and appointments, one thing became abundantly clear: breast cancer does not discriminate. It doesn't care about age, race, or background. More and more women are being diagnosed in their 20s and 30s, shattering the misconception that this disease only affects older individuals. My own diagnosis served as a stark reminder of this harsh reality, and I knew then that I wanted to dedicate my life to raising awareness and helping others understand the importance of early detection and intervention.

Every woman should know their lifetime breast cancer risk and recommended screening guidelines. While most people think of a lump as the first sign of breast cancer, there is a whole list of other signs and symptoms that are often overlooked. It is crucial for women to be intimately familiar with how their breasts normally look and feel, as even subtle changes can be indicative of underlying issues and should be checked by an experienced health care professional. This is especially important for women who are not yet at the age where regular screening is recommended. By encouraging women to prioritize their health and seek medical attention promptly, we can potentially catch breast cancer in its earliest stages, when treatment outcomes are most favorable.

Through my journey, I've learned that resilience knows no bounds. My battle with breast cancer may have been unexpected, but it has transformed me, instilling within me a newfound appreciation for life's fragility and the resilience of the human spirit. Despite the challenges I've faced, I've emerged stronger and more determined than ever to make a difference and inspire others to take charge of their health.

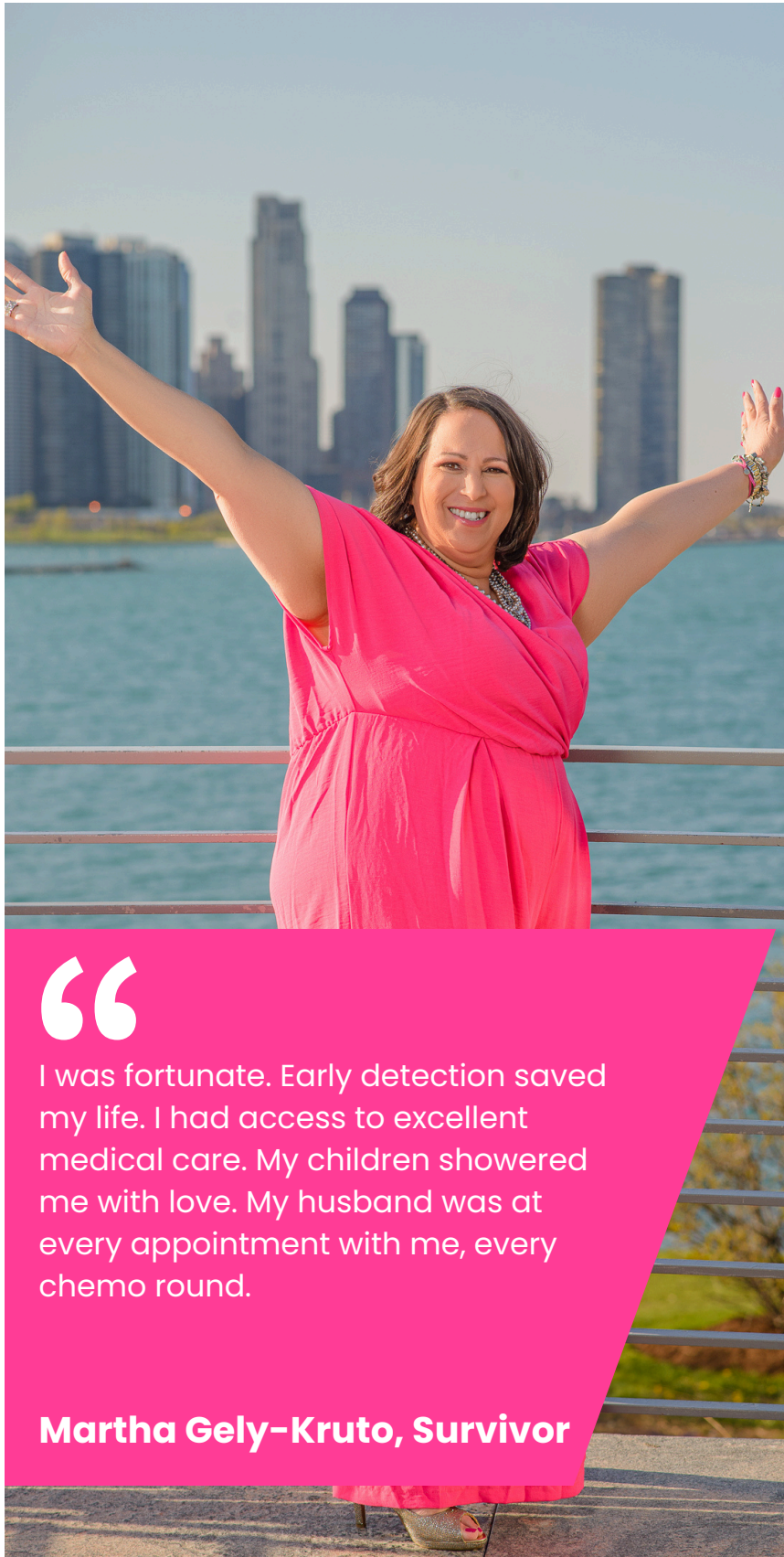
This is why I am honored to serve as an ambassador for the American Cancer Society's Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Campaign. Together, we can raise awareness, support those affected by breast cancer, and ensure no one has to face this devastating disease alone. Let's strive towards a world where breast cancer is nothing more than a distant memory.



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I was fortunate. Early detection saved my life. I had access to excellent medical care. My children showered me with love. My husband was at every appointment with me, every chemo round.

Martha Gely-Kruto, Survivor

I missed my mammogram appointment. I went to the right location, at the right time, but a day late. Life was chaotic so I laughed, apologized for wasting everyone's time, and asked about making a new appointment. The kind ladies working the front desk that afternoon told me to wait. They thought they could get me in. That NEVER happens. It was January 28, 2022. Just another day.

A few days later, I got a call. I needed to come in for a more in depth scan. I still didn't think there was a problem. It wasn't until after that appointment that I knew something was off. But what? It couldn't be cancer. I had no symptoms, no family history, I was living my best life!

After additional scans and a biopsy, and what seemed like forever and more, I received the news no one wants to hear: Martha, you have breast cancer. It was March 1, 2022. I was diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma grade 2 and ductal carcinoma in situ grade 3. I was scared. I was stunned. I was angry. I couldn't process what I was hearing. I couldn't breathe. I remember closing my eyes and thinking "how do I tell my children?" My son was in 8th grade and my daughter was just a freshman in high school. My heart broke in a million pieces right there and then.

I was fortunate. Early detection saved my life. I had access to excellent medical care. My children showered me with love. My husband was at every appointment with me, every chemo round. My amazing wine club sisters, my family members, friends, and neighbors fed my husband and children and supported us for 8 months while I battled this disease. My work family at NBKL said "don't worry about work, we got you." This is not what or how cancer looks like for everyone.



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I didn't want to approach this challenging period of my life as a victim; I wanted to take charge. I became informed, built my tribe of support and began living with intention, finding joy in the smallest of moments.

Lisa Nagorny, Survivor

I'm only alive because a breast cancer survivor bravely shared her story with me.

As a former college athlete and military veteran who served in Afghanistan, I was the picture of health and toughness. Until one day, I started feeling a tiredness in my body that was...different. Different from the grind I'd become accustomed to juggling a demanding corporate job in NYC and caring for my 4 year-old son as a divorced single mom.

I KNEW deep down something wasn't right, but doctor after doctor offered no answers. Just as I was about to give up, I reconnected with a friend who was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. She shared how advocating for herself, pushing for a more cutting-edge test, made ALL the difference.

Inspired by her story, I pushed a little harder with my doctor who ultimately recommended a mammogram "just in case." The breast surgeon reassured me I likely had nothing to worry about: 36 years old, no family history, no major risk factors. And so after my imaging I went about my day as usual.

The next morning as I was sitting bleary-eyed at my dining table sipping on a cup of coffee my phone rang. My heart began racing...only one person would be calling me at 8am. "hellooo...?" I asked in a hesitant voice, holding my breath. "I'm so sorry. Lisa, you have breast cancer. A mastectomy is your only option." It turned out that an annoying rash I had was a sign of breast cancer. WHAT?!?!?

That moment kickstarted a whirlwind of consults and decisions: Who did I want for my surgical team? Double vs single mastectomy? What type of reconstruction? What do I tell my son? What about my job? Ahhhh.....!! After a few days being consumed by dizzying thoughts and feelings, I decided to reclaim my power. I didn't want to approach this challenging period of my life as a victim; I wanted to take charge.

I became informed, studying up on the disease and choices in front of me. I built my tribe of family, friends, and breast cancer survivors whom I could learn from and lean on. I began living with intention, being fiercely present in my life and finding joy in the smallest of moments.

From that point on I was in the driver's seat, not cancer. I would go on to find out that my cancer was HER2+, ER/PR-. (Basically an aggressive cancer that requires an equally aggressive response.) Luckily I had the support and mindset in place to take on the year of chemotherapy and immunotherapy that awaited me post surgery.

While one of the most challenging and humbling periods of my life, it was also the most transformative. I deepened my relationships, met an incredible single dad who after a month of dating accompanied me to my immunotherapy treatment; he's now my husband. I also gained a deep perspective on what mattered most to me. I'd continue to live with intention, purpose and service to others.

So here I am, six years after my diagnosis. I'm now making good on that promise as a coach empowering others through challenging transitions so that they can build fulfilling lives and careers they're passionate about. And I'm so honored to be part of Chicago's Portraits of Hope as an opportunity to pay it forward by sharing my story in hopes of saving even one life, just as mine was saved.



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