

I am a mother, sister, grandmother, stepmother, friend and breast cancer survivor.

In 1979, my 26-year-old sister had breast carcinoma in situ. In 1990, my 69-year-old mother was diagnosed with bilateral breast cancer.

In January of 1992, at age 44, seven weeks after meeting Larry, the man to whom I am now married, I was diagnosed with cancer in my right breast. The cancer was small and the lymph nodes were negative. I had a lumpectomy followed by 33 radiation treatments.

The treatments made me sick, but I pushed myself. I worked fulltime, missing only one day of work. My family, Larry and my friends were the best support system, helping me through every moment.

Life returned to some sense of normalcy. Larry and I became engaged, and my life was heading in a positive direction. But, in September 1994 a malignant lump was discovered in my left breast. WHAM! CANCER AGAIN!

I was devastated and frightened. After discussions with several doctors, my family and Larry, I chose bilateral mastectomy without reconstruction. This decision lessened my fear of future breast cancer. Larry said I was more than my two breasts. We married on Valentine's Day 1995.

Because of the cancer in my family, my daughters asked me to have testing for the breast cancer gene. I tested negative. My 36-year-old daughter also tested negative, but five years ago she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was 36 at the time, She is a five year survivor. She has had surgery and is doing well. I still worry for her, for my other daughter, for your daughters. But I know that by telling my story, I may be able to help other women with breast cancer.

Breast cancer is curable if found early. Get your checkups and mammograms and make sure your family and friends do the same. Do not be afraid to ask questions, listen to your body and use all the resources that are available to women today.

I am blessed in so many ways and I am grateful to be alive. I realize how important it is to surround yourself with family and friends. My life has changed for the better since my diagnosis of breast cancer. I appreciate the small things in life: my grandchildren's laughter, my husband's love, my children, my stepchildren, having a sister to share things with, reading a good book, going to the beach and just staring at the water. I have learned to look at the big picture. Each of us should look around and find joy in the small things.

Every day I am reminded of two things: I am a woman without breasts and more importantly, I have survived breast cancer. But I have now survived 17 years from my first primary and 14 1/2 from my second.

smell the roses.....