

I NEVER REALIZED THAT SHARING MY BREAST CANCER EXPERIENCE ON A WEBSITE CALLED "BALD WENDY" WOULD ULTIMATELY CHANGE THE COURSE OF MY LIFE — AND MY CAREER.

My name is Wendy McCoolle and I was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 42 – Stage 1 Ductal Carcinoma with no lymph node involvement. Because my mother is a three-time survivor (she was initially diagnosed at the same age I was only 25 years earlier) my doctors were a little more aggressive with my treatments. I was also HER2 Positive and Estrogen Receptor negative so the course of action ... shut down my ovaries.

My Mom and I talk about our experiences a lot. Things were VERY different for her. When she went to the doctor's office, alone – because no one prepared her for what she might expect – the nurses wouldn't make eye contact with her after the doctor broke the news that she had breast cancer. They simply sent her home with nothing but an appointment card for the next week. I can't even imagine what was going through her mind as she sat in the parking lot shaking and sobbing. She refers to this as being a very dark time in her life because people didn't want to talk about breast cancer back then, or at least that's what the doctor's suggested to her. It took her 10 years to start a support group at her local hospital. Today they have one of the strongest and most supportive breast centers in this area. Good things DO come out of challenging times!

I was more far more fortunate. I had a wonderful surgeon who cancelled all his appointments to see me and my husband the afternoon that we learned of my cancer. Although I was terrified, I also had a calming sense about me that suggested I would be OK. And I was ... and I am. So is Mom. And the beast even came back to visit her three more times – two more rounds of breast cancer and more recently a diagnosis of lung cancer. But we caught them all early and she's doing great. She's my hero.

I am truly blessed in that I have a wonderful, loving family and a very large circle of friends from near and far. When I went through my treatments it was really hard keeping everyone updated as to how I was doing. I felt like I would be bothering them by sending periodic updates, and often times they didn't know how to ask. It was very challenging for everyone involved ... not just for me as the patient. So I decided to create a website called Bald Wendy and there I would add chapters and photos as I progressed through my treatments. It was so healing for me to put down in words how I was feeling physically and emotionally, and a non-intrusive way for all of them – at their leisure – to read how I was doing.

What happened soon after changed my life. At first I recognized the entries in my guestbook, but suddenly there were notes from people I didn't know. They too were going through breast cancer ... and they were afraid. They thanked me for sharing my story so openly and honestly and it soon became clear to me that if my ONE story could touch that many people, imagine if we could create a community where ANYONE could write, read, share ... and connect.

With the incredible support of my wonderful husband (who I had just married two months prior to my diagnosis) I left my corporate career as a marketing manager and founded a non-profit organization called BreastCancerStories.org. It's a very special website where Breast Cancer Patients and Care Givers can write about their experiences, share their progress with loved ones, and read stories and connect with other Patients and Care Givers who are going through a similar experience. What truly makes BreastCancerStories.org different from a traditional blog site is that the stories are all searchable by location, age, type of breast cancer / treatment, marital status, ethnic background and more. Imagine a single mother under the age of 30 who just had a mastectomy being able to find someone who is going through the same situation – it's very therapeutic to read their stories and even connect with them directly through the website.

Although at times frightening and certainly inconvenient, I wouldn't trade my breast cancer experience for the world. I was able to look at things differently – so much more clearly – and I could finally let go of the small things that just didn't matter, to forgive moments from the past that continued to bring emotional pain whenever they would resurface, and to find peace and a deep comfort from within. Life IS good!