



RESILIENCE

Women share their journeys with cancer

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R E S I L I E N C E

Ramzi and Nicole Mansour

Courage doesn't always roar.
Sometimes courage is the quiet
voice at the end of the day saying,
'I will try again tomorrow.'

MARY ANNE RADMACHER

FOREWORD

Cancer! Just the word itself strikes fear into even the most resilient. It is the fear of everything we know about cancer, and yet it is even more about the fear of the unknown, and the fear of an uncertain journey into a future that only yesterday was full of hope and adventure.

This book charts that journey in a way that offers each of us renewed hope in the human spirit. Ramzi Mansour's portraits are strong and beautiful, capturing as they do the individual character and spirit of each one of these extraordinary women who has stared into the unknown and then made that journey back to the light with their dignity intact, and a determination that life itself should take on a new and different meaning.

Nicole Mansour has curated every story. Each one is different, and every story fits a different facet of us all. These brave women take us through their stories, on a journey from the seismic shock of that

first diagnosis, to the unreal sound of cancer in a context relating to oneself. It is a journey through the real and cold realisation that mortality beckons from some far, dark corner: A corner where fear, anger and denial lurk. But for many of them, light has arrived.

On diagnosis, patients often tell me that they feel as though they are in a 'parallel world' – a world where the cancer patient lives somewhere on the outside of normality, separated by a pane of glass, through which they can see, but cannot break through. These portraits and words provide us with a glimpse through that window into their lives; through that pane of glass – and we feel their pain, their fear and their loneliness, despite the clamour of relatives and friends.

But resilience in all its manifest glory is here, too. These beautiful, strong, human portraits truly bear testament to the bravery, acceptance and hope of these women, who have broken through that pane of glass and rejoined the world.

Those who have been on this journey help us all to be strong. We should, and will be, inspired by these stories of the strength of the human spirit.

As an oncologist for some 45 years, I see in this book a journey I have been on with thousands of patients, each one in some way an amalgam of all expressed here, but each different and unique. I applaud these women for having the strength to lay bare their souls to help others who may make the same journey into the unknown.

This is a very beautiful and poignant book that should be read by all: Patients, families and medical professionals. It is a book about the triumph of the human spirit – it is the triumph of resilience.

Resilience is a tribute to the passion and love of Ramzi and Nicole Mansour, and I assure them that it will make a difference to a great many lives, as it has done to mine.

Dr Peter Harper

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

This book is dedicated to our family, friends and loved ones who have travelled the long and far-reaching road with cancer.

This project was close to our hearts and we set out to produce a work that would somehow bring to life authentic accounts of everyday people describing what it is like to journey with cancer.

The women whose images and stories we share in these pages are the true heroines. They have afforded us the honour of sharing intimate glimpses into their raw and real experiences of living with this disease, with each story capturing a unique aspect of what that can entail.

Our intention was, and still is, to bring those who find themselves facing the challenge of sitting in a cancer room with their own diagnosis, to a place of hope. May you find resonance within these pages.

We offer our gratitude to each woman featured in this book; for the inspiration and humbling reminder of the tremendous resilience of the human spirit.

Ramzi and Nicole Mansour

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T A R Y N

I don't have any profound wisdom about how I managed to find the will to continue. I love my life, and it's a good one. I wanted to continue living, so I said: 'Tell me what to do to keep living, and I will do that.'

My journey with cancer started way before I was diagnosed. Both my mother and grandmother are breast cancer survivors. Having it in my family, I was always aware of the possibility that I, too, could receive the same diagnosis. To some extent, I started preparing myself mentally for that, but I wasn't ready to be diagnosed so young. I was only 31 at the time.

My whole journey was quite an emotional rollercoaster. I found a lump in my breast and took myself to the doctor. At that time, I wasn't too worried, but the lump was removed and sent for testing. Then my worst fears were confirmed: It was cancerous.

I don't think I was ready to process that information. After speaking to my doctor, I went straight back to work and just sat at my desk for about an hour, unable to do much. Then I told myself: 'This is madness. You need to call someone, and you need to go home.' I phoned my mom, who was very comforting and talked me through it. Then I went home and told my boyfriend. From there, everything happened really quickly.

There was about a two-week gap between my diagnosis and starting chemotherapy. I remember a rushed, panicky time when I tried to learn as much as I could and read as many books as possible to try to prepare myself for my treatment, but, once I realised that

my doctors were confident that it was not life-threatening, I felt far more comforted.

No longer worried about losing my life, I was then confronted by the realisation that I was going to lose my hair, and I began to worry about what I would look like. That was quite bizarre because I had never thought that vanity would play such a big role in my journey. All of my life I have had long hair. It was my crown, and I wore it proudly. I had to ask myself: 'How much of my personality is tied to my hair? Is it linked to my confidence and extroversion? If I lose my hair, will I lose some of those aspects of myself? Will it somehow make me smaller? Will I feel less confident engaging with people?' I didn't really know how I would feel once chemotherapy had taken its toll. Would I feel unattractive, unsexy or ugly?

To try to mitigate those feelings, I booked a photoshoot for the day before I started chemo. I dressed up, wore my sexiest black dress, added some curls to my long hair, and had some beautiful photos taken. I felt like I needed to capture that version of myself on film. I didn't know if I was ever going to get that person back, and if I did, how long would it take until I saw her again? I wanted to document the precancer me, and I'm so glad that I did. It was a lovely experience. Once it was done, I was ready to let go of my hair and my ego. My whole family came with me to the hairdresser.

The first day of chemo was quite an emotional one. In traumatic situations, I tend to go straight into survival mode and pack away my emotions until a more convenient time to deal with them. Up until that day, I hadn't really cried about anything that had happened. I walked into the chemo ward, trying to overcompensate

for my fear and self-pity by looking confident, wearing a big smile and trying to mask my fear with humour.

The nurse began to prepare my hand for the drip, and I saw the bag of chemo hanging at my side. It was the Red Devil. It was bright-red and looked like poison. Then I saw the needle, and I burst into tears. It was my first proper cry since my diagnosis. Up until that point, everything had been so abstract, but right then, it finally became real. The chemo was going to course through my veins and become a part of me. I didn't cry because I was particularly sad; I was simply overwhelmed by the whole experience.

I had another three rounds of the Red Devil after that. I think one of the psychological struggles of undergoing chemo during early-stage cancer is that the treatment process feels like it's in reverse. Usually, you feel sick first, then go to the doctor, who gives you medicine to make you feel better. In my case, I didn't feel ill at all – in fact, I felt like I was in the best shape of my life – but I had to go to a doctor for treatment, which made me feel awful, all the while trusting that I was getting better. It is quite difficult to wrap one's head around.

When I first saw myself without hair, I cried. I didn't cry because I didn't like what I saw, but because my shaved head was such an undeniable indication that I had no control over what was happening to me or to my body. It was that feeling of powerlessness that made me cry. However, on an aesthetic level, I actually didn't mind the way I looked.

As it turned out, none of my personality was in my hair. I was exactly the same: My personality, my smile, and my eagerness to get

out into the world and engage with people stayed exactly the same. My biggest fears had been completely unfounded.

After the chemo, I had surgery to remove any potentially infected tissue around the original lump, and I had radiation, which didn't have massive side effects. By that time, I had started to feel better, my hair was starting to grow back, and my energy levels had improved, so I was feeling very positive. I felt like I had a schedule of things to complete, and once they were done, I would be in the clear. Fortunately, the cancer was caught early, so I was in the best possible position to fight it off. In that sense, I felt quite blessed.

Cancer requires six to eight months of treatment, so, it was a massive relief to come out the other end. But if I am honest, although I was feeling joyful, positive and hopeful, I still hadn't internalised the whole experience. I had somehow managed to separate myself from the experience, as if I was watching a documentary. I had the visual memories and a cognitive understanding of what had happened, but it didn't feel like it was my own, personal experience. I kept it very much at arm's length, and to this day, I am still working through all of those emotions.

Whenever I tell people about my experience, they tell me that I am so brave, but in my mind, I didn't have a choice. It wasn't a question of bravery; it was a question of doing what I needed to do to live. It was as simple as that. I don't have any profound wisdom about how I managed to find the will to continue. I love my life, and it's a good one. I wanted to continue living, so I said: 'Tell me what to do to keep living, and I will do that.'

Cancer has taught me to truly appreciate my body and my health and to not take anything for granted – especially while I am

young. I went through chemo at 31, when I was in peak condition, and it made me extremely weak. It gave me an insight into what it could be like when I am much older, and for this reason, I will always treat my body with respect.

Up until that point, I had put so much effort and energy into my physical appearance, because I thought it had this great value and that it contributed so much to my life. When I suddenly found myself in a position in which my appearance was beyond my control, I realised how little my physical appearance contributed to the rest of my life. That was comforting. I no longer agonise over my physical appearance, although I still take pride in the way I look.

I have also learnt so much about my own resilience. I have surprised myself. Sometimes we wonder what we would do in certain situations, and it is almost impossible to predict. You will only know for sure once you have gone through something and are able to look back. I'm proud of the way that I handled my journey, and I'm proud of the fact that I was able to keep a positive and healthy mindset.

The mind is so powerful – it can really change your experience. When you are diagnosed with cancer, there are some things that you can't avoid, so you have to be kind to yourself. I am not saying that you can't feel sad, sorry for yourself, or even sick. Of course, you can – you are only human. But hang on to your perspective – and to your desire to live. That's the most important thing you can do for yourself.



N A N A

Before cancer, I wasn't a very confident person, but I have learnt that I am actually very strong and that I can fight.

One day, while I was at work, I felt a growth under my left breast. After two weeks, it had grown bigger, so I decided to go to the clinic. The doctor referred me to a hospital for a scan. There, I was told that I needed to have a biopsy.

When the doctor called me a week later, he said that some cells weren't showing up properly and that I had to return for another biopsy. So, after another two weeks, I went to see the doctor again. The growth had become even bigger by then. The doctor examined me and put me on the list for surgery to remove it.

I had the operation to remove the whole growth, and after three weeks, I was informed that I had to return to hospital. Testing of the mass showed a malignant tumour. Without further treatment, the cells would spread to my whole breast. The only solution was to remove my breast entirely.

Three weeks later, I met with the doctors, who told me that they would remove the breast and insert an implant at the same time. They would try their best to match my implant to my other breast.

After another two months, I went into theatre for a mastectomy. The surgery took five to six hours – it was a very big operation. When I awoke, I saw that I still had my nipple, which meant that the cancer hadn't spread, thank God. I then had to stay in hospital for another week. That wasn't an easy time. I was no longer as I

was before – I had lost my breast. It was hard, both physically and emotionally, and I felt very unstable.

When I returned home, I was booked off work for another two weeks – but my company gave me two months off. Although I spent that time at home, friends and colleagues were always there for me.

The toughest time in my journey had to be when I was first told that I had cancer. My first thought was my child – I am a single mother. I thought: ‘I am going to die. What is going to happen to my son?’ I felt like my life was hanging in the balance and I didn’t know what to do. I felt stuck, like I wasn’t really existing. I was frozen; I couldn’t do anything; I couldn’t focus; I couldn’t even work properly. I cried every day, and I lost weight. Even though I’m a skinny person, I couldn’t bring myself to eat. I really felt like I was dying.

At that stage, I didn’t believe that people could survive cancer because everyone I knew who had cancer had died. But after my operation, when I saw the support I had, I thought that perhaps I could live after all.

The support of those who love you – your family and friends – is so important. When you get a diagnosis like this, you really need someone to push you through and remind you that you’re still alive and that you have a long way to go. There’s still a journey in front of you, and you can keep going, but you really need people around you, or you won’t make it. It will kill you on the inside before the disease can take you.

I don’t have family close by, so my colleagues have been like my family. My church friends have also been very supportive.

When I came out of hospital and couldn't cook or do anything for myself, every day, a church member would arrive with food. It was incredible. They also took care of my child, and they were there for us. I realised that I hadn't been abandoned. That support showed me that I still had people who loved and cared for me. It helped me to realise that I could still stand up and fight.

I have learnt that although cancer kills, you can beat it, and you can survive. You can become cancer-free – I am. I knew that I couldn't just give up. I realised that I could still live because there was life ahead of me. I couldn't just lie down and die.

The challenge, especially in my community, is that people are scared of the word 'cancer'. They are not aware of what actually happens, or when you should go see a doctor. Some people believe that there is no cure for cancer, so they leave it too late, or they think that traditional medicine will cure them. There is no traditional medicine to cure cancer. You don't just get cancer and die – there is a process that happens first. You must go see a doctor, and there are treatments to help rid you of this disease.

My son is now 11, and Mommy is everything to him. His father is out of the picture, and I have been raising him alone since he was nine months old. He gave me a strong reason to fight.

I would like to say to anyone diagnosed with cancer: Don't give up. You can fight it. Just follow what the doctors say and surround yourself with people who strengthen, motivate and boost you. They will help you, but you must fight, too. You can conquer this disease.

Before cancer, I wasn't a very confident person, but I have learnt that I am actually very strong and that I can fight. I can do things that I previously thought were impossible. I never thought that I

could go through everything that I did, but I managed, and I feel proud of myself. I hope people are encouraged by my story. Cancer does not equal death. You can survive and beat it.



G W E N

If one word could describe my life now, it would be 'colourful'. When I went for chemo, I always used to wear white. Now, I wear bright colours. My life is colourful, happy, and spiritual.

I wasn't scared the day my oncologist told me that I had stage 4 lymphoma – 80% in the bone marrow and spleen. Perhaps there was no fear because I hadn't expected the diagnosis. Up until then, I hadn't really experienced any symptoms. It was my gynaecologist who had felt a lump in my stomach. I'd then been sent for a biopsy, which had revealed the cancer.

When I received the diagnosis, I kept telling my doctor: 'I've got this, I'm okay; I've got this; I'm okay with cancer.' About two years before, I'd read the book, *The Power of your Mind*, by Chris Oyakhilome. In many ways, that had prepared me for the news. I'd read the book twice to make sure that I understood it, and I believed in the power of my mind. When I told the doctor that I was okay with the news, I really meant it.

I had very long hair at the time, and my doctor informed me that I would lose all of it. I said that I was okay with that, too, because new hair would grow out, which would mean a new beginning for me and I could start a new chapter in my life. I also told my doctor that, stage 4 or not, I would not die from cancer – I would die from old age.

I did eight cycles of the Red Devil chemo, and then I did eight of another kind. I never had any extremely bad side effects, and I was never nauseous, but I did lose my hair. I think reality kicked in

that day. I had a really good cry then, but that was the first and last time I cried. The only other real side effects I experienced were the loss of my sense of taste, and numbness in my feet and fingers. Still, I continued to say: 'Cancer, you will not have power over me. You will not! I'm blessed with amazing faith.' That is how I continued to treat my cancer throughout my two-year journey.

My partner, however, was not as okay as I was. He ended up in hospital with a heart attack from the shock. My family, particularly my oldest daughter, went into a depression. My younger daughter is very fond of her cats, and one of them was killed in front of her. Then her dog ran away, and all of that happened around the same time as the cancer news. I said to them: 'Can't you see what is happening? I'm standing strong, I'm not going anywhere, I'm not going to die. So, if you aren't going to be on the same page as me – believing and knowing that I will survive – then I'm going to stop chemo.'

I wouldn't really have stopped the chemo, but I threatened them so that they would pull themselves together. They all went for counselling, until we were all on the same page. They couldn't believe that I was treating cancer as if I had the flu!

I used to do homecare nursing. While I was undergoing treatment, there were times when I didn't feel like getting out of bed, and everybody thought I needed care. That was really difficult for me, because I was used to being the carer – I wanted to be the carer. In reality, there was only one instance when I was so ill that someone had to care for me. Even then, that was hard for me to process.

I became friends with many of the people I met in treatment at the hospital. Some of them went into remission and some of them

passed away. But I'm not scared of that, either. I have peace about it. I tell myself that if it's God's will for me to die that way, then so be it. I have an inner peace about what has happened to me, where I am now, and how my story has come to help other people. I now do cancer talks, and sometimes corporates or churches invite me to tell my story.

Cancer changed me a lot. I had always been a religious person, but my faith has grown significantly, and my mindset is now totally different. I no longer deal with things the way I did in the past. Before I got cancer, I was quick to anger. Perhaps that was because of what I'd been through: I was abused; and I grew up not knowing who my father was. When I was young, I was angry because I wanted to know my father and where I came from. I couldn't deal with the anger issues that I had created in my core.

After the chemo, I went into remission, but I was battling to sleep. The doctor told me that the insomnia was caused by the chemo, but I booked myself into hospital under the treatment of a psychologist and a psychiatrist. I just wanted to get everything out of my system. From there, I learnt how to deal with conflict. I learnt that there are some things in life that I can't change. I realised that if a situation is to change, the change has to come from *me*. And it works for me, it really does. I now feel at peace and can deal with anything that comes my way. I live my life to the full and do all of the things that I've never done before. I'm meeting wonderful people, too. That has been a big change for me.

To anyone hearing a cancer diagnosis for the first time: Try not to think of death. You are not alone – there is help out there. Cancer

is not something of which you should feel ashamed. The more you speak about it, the more people can pray for you.

I can't expect everyone to have my faith or to be as strong as I am, but one has a choice to either lie down and die, or to fight! The words 'death' and 'fear' should not be in one's vocabulary. I have gotten rid of them. I choose to think about life. Where there's life, there's hope.

If one word could describe my life now, it would be 'colourful'. When I went for chemo, I always used to wear white. Now, I wear bright colours. My life is colourful, happy, and spiritual. I live every day, and I sing and laugh every day. So, I encourage you: Live today as if it's your last. Live every day as if it's your last.



ANNEMARIE

You just have to love life and find the beauty in it – whether that means getting a tattoo, or having another bottle of wine. Just do it!

I was only 27 years old when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. At the time, I don't think the reality of my condition really sank in. When the doctor phoned to give me the news, I thought that I was going to die. I heard the word 'cancer' and assumed that I had two months left to live, which is ridiculous and just not the case.

My doctors informed me that I had to have a double mastectomy, which was devastating. I loved my breasts, and losing them was hard. I still haven't really adjusted to that yet, and it's hard to look in the mirror. I lost a nipple, too, so I feel like a part of my womanhood was taken away without my permission. I would have wanted to breastfeed my children, but I can no longer do that.

The menopause that resulted from my treatment was hell. There I was at 27, and all of a sudden, I found myself in the body of a 70-year-old, complete with hot flushes and insomnia. I was taking tranquilisers and five sleeping pills a night, just to get through. My sex drive took a dive, too. On top of that, there was the weight gain – I picked up about 8kg, which made me feel just horrible about my body.

Through it all, one of my biggest concerns was my husband. Where was he going to find another wife? I started thinking through all of my single girlfriends, and I'd say to him: 'You need to phone this one up, she'll be a good match for you ... but this one will drive you crazy ...' I didn't want him to be alone for the rest of his life.

I think what really kept me going were my businesses. We own jewellery shops, and I do all of the buying and designing. I work in the shops, too, so if I'm not there, the shops don't function as usual. I knew that if I wasn't there, our businesses wouldn't survive, so I threw myself into my work and just kept going. As a business owner, one tends to feel guilty about not being in the business 24/7. When I had my operation, I went into hospital on the Friday and checked myself out on the Sunday. On the Monday, I was back at work – not full-day, though. Throughout my treatment, my businesses remained my drive and motivation – perhaps an escape, too. I didn't really have time to think about the fact that I had cancer – I needed to go to the shops!

I'm glad to say that I'm now cancer-free. My doctor told me that I needed to be on treatment for five years, or better yet, 10. Every year, I'd see him with the same speech prepared about how I'm done, I'm tired, I'm over it and I can't take it anymore, and every year he'd give me the same response: I can't stop treatment, that it's not time yet, and that I need to be strong and keep going. At the end of 2019, after four years of treatment, I gave him my speech again, but that time he said: 'Okay, fine. We'll take you off the medication, but then you have to fall pregnant as soon as possible.'

Falling pregnant had been my dream for a long time. I'd had it in my head that I'd like to start trying for a baby by the time I was 30 – but then I was told that I had to be on medication for a further five years, which affects fertility. I had the egg supply of someone in their late 40s. It was devastating! It did take some intervention to fall pregnant, but it seems to have worked!

Honestly, I don't think that I'm quite over my cancer ordeal. I've always been healthy. I exercise and I'm not overweight; I don't smoke and only drink the occasional glass of wine. I did everything right. It's not in my family, so there's simply no explanation why I got it. I still feel angry. It's also unfair that my husband had to go through this. We are so young.

Talking about everything has helped me to get through it. I was one of those people who announced everything on social media. I'm an extreme extrovert and have a big group of friends. I needed people around me all of the time. I still do. It helps me to forget about the cancer. For my 30th birthday, I got a huge tattoo done, which is so not me and not something I would ever have done before. Now, when I get undressed and climb into the shower and see my breasts, I just look at my tattoo and say: 'You are beautiful. You are still beautiful.' I think looking good helps me, too: Getting dressed up, putting on make-up and just feeling good gets me through the day. For me, it's all about learning to forget about it, or to not think about it.

This whole journey has been hard. I remember phoning one of my very good friends on the day I was diagnosed. I was crying and she said to me: 'You are lucky, you've got the baby cancer.' At that time, I thought: 'It's still cancer, it's not the flu.' I was quite upset then, but now I realise that it's probably the best thing that anyone could have said to me. I would say the same thing to someone else: It's rough, but you'll be fine. You're not going to die; life is not going to end. You just have to find ways to move. Put on a pair of high heels and red lipstick and keep going.

After I have children, my doctor wants me to continue with treatment for another five years, but I don't think I'll go back on it. I want to start looking for alternatives, whatever those may be. I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

This is not a nice journey. Menopause isn't pleasant, either, but I feel like I've done it now. I've walked the road and I don't think that I can do it again. I think it's hard for anyone diagnosed with breast cancer, no matter your age. It's tough on everyone, including those close to you. No, it's not fair, but life isn't fair. You just have to love life and find the beauty in it – whether that means getting a tattoo, or having another bottle of wine. Just do it!



N A N D I

When something like breast cancer happens to you, life is no longer about the physical, how you look, or what people think of you. It is about your health. Nothing trumps life.

My story is typical of that of many women: I'd felt something unusual in my breast that I knew I should get checked out, but I didn't. Deep down, I already sensed that something was wrong, and that frightened me. I waited a few months before going to my GP. I was 29 at the time.

My GP told me: 'Just go check it out at the hospital. It's probably nothing, but let's see.' I delayed things yet again for another few months. I just didn't want to hear anyone confirm what I already knew in my heart. When I couldn't ignore it any longer, I went for a biopsy and mammogram. I was eventually diagnosed with breast cancer – not an early stage. That was not great news to hear, and I went straight into treatment.

A surgeon at the hospital referred me to a wonderful team of doctors, all within one practice. After meeting my doctor, I felt so much better. She is such a good spirit and a great person, and she made me feel like everything could be okay-ish.

I had to have chemotherapy before I could have surgery. That continued for nearly four months. I was quite fearful before my first round of chemo because I didn't know how my body was going to take it. With cancer, you also need to make decisions quickly: Did I want to have children? I didn't think I would need to consider that for a while yet, but suddenly, I had to think about my future.

I'd read and heard truly horrible stories about cancer treatment, but I was lucky that I didn't have as hard a time as I'd expected. My doctor also reassured me that if I just followed his steps, I'd be fine. So, I did.

In the early phase, when everything was still unknown, I would become very anxious. Every time I started a new treatment, I knew that I just had to hang in through the beginning, and then after that, I would be fine. Yes, I experienced the hair loss and was tired, but I recovered quickly each time – perhaps because I'm mostly healthy and I'm younger than most cancer sufferers. I didn't even start juicing, or eating super-healthily. I figured that I would start the treatment and then see from there.

The chemo was followed by hormone therapy. My cancer was hormone-positive, so it shrunk after that. I'd been hoping my doctors would be able to treat me with medication alone, so when I found out that I had to have a unilateral mastectomy – which meant removing my left breast – I panicked. The surgery was then followed by radiation. All of that treatment took a full year.

I am clear of the cancer for now; we just monitor it every six months to make sure it hasn't come back. I'm on a five-year hormone therapy treatment plan to keep the cancer away, but at my age and with my type of cancer, there is a likelihood that it will recur. I don't like to speak about the details of my cancer stage, although many people ask me about it. I'm actually quite defensive about it. Let's just say that it wasn't early.

So much happens to one during cancer: I gained weight during my treatment and people were asking: 'Aren't you supposed to be getting skinny?' I just got fatter and fatter! Although I used to wear

hats often, over the past year, I've mostly worn hats. When I finally announced on social media that I was undergoing cancer treatment, many people were really shocked and said things like: 'Oh my gosh. I didn't know. You've been looking amazing.' I also tend to cut my hair often, so people thought that I was just trying out a new, bald, summer look! I can laugh about it now. They said: 'You girls of colour look so amazing with short hair. Look at you glow.' Chemo was so good for my skin – it was glowing. Everybody was telling me how amazing my skin looked.

Before the cancer, I was healthy – I had really great breasts, too – 36DDs that didn't need a bra. I should have known something was off! I've had a breast reduction on the one in order to match my prosthesis, which is quite heavy. Now, I have maybe a full B or a small C cup. I love it, though. I explained to my surgeon that if she is going to redo my one breast, she needed to make it super-cute. I don't think my new boob will ever match this one, so I'm happy with my prosthesis.

I don't need to explain the fact that I have one breast to anyone. I haven't had reconstructive surgery yet. We put it off until we knew that the cancer was totally clear – which it is. Now is the time to do it, but I don't know if I want more invasive surgery. Some people have up to three surgeries, just to get their breasts back. I am quite comfortable with myself and my prosthesis. Nowadays, they make pretty good prosthetics. For the most part, no one can tell, unless I get undressed. I mean, what is the issue, really?

When something like breast cancer happens to you, life is no longer about the physical, how you look, or what people think of you. It is about your health. Nothing trumps life.

My biggest challenge was sharing the fact that I had cancer with my family and friends. I'm extremely close to my sisters. Having to share the news with them ... that's when I really panicked. Fortunately, it appears that there is no history of breast cancer in my family.

My doctors, family and friends have ended up being my biggest support. I was diagnosed only a year-and-a-half after moving to a new city, so I didn't have my support system close by. But my team of doctors has been amazing. I am very blessed. I don't think I would have got that one-on-one interaction, love and care anywhere else.

I am lucky: I'm a unicorn. At the hospital where I did my treatment, there was no one of my age or colour. I followed a couple of young people online from abroad with similar statuses, but I haven't been able to find anyone locally who is similar to me, who can tell me what their treatment has been like. As a person of colour, I've discovered that there are so few of us. I'm lucky that I've had good medical care. Many people don't get that. One needs so many specialists and doctors, which I don't think many people of colour get in the public health system. I have thought a lot about that.

I think that in this country, people are afraid of cancer. No one talks about it, and no one wants to be known to have had it, so there's no support. It's weird – black people often consider it to be a white person's disease – which it's not. There are such high numbers of people of colour getting it now. There's still probably not enough research around it. If not enough people of colour are getting medical care and getting all of the tests done, then they can't really find commonalities. Hopefully, it's going to get better,

as many more of us are talking about what we've been through, and that we're still here.

Perhaps there is a stigma around cancer, too. I am young and I happen to be black, and I can't even find people my age who have been through similar experiences. When I do find cancer survivors, they are usually middle-aged women. If you make the mistake of researching your cancer on the internet, it will seem like your life is over and that you're really ill. You won't find anything good written about it. In reality, though, I worked the entire way through my treatment. I never stopped. The week after I ended chemo, I travelled, too. I didn't want my life to be consumed by this thing.

A friend of mine recently told me that I was a fighter. I told him that I really had an issue with people saying that. You can only fight cancer if you are doing well, but what about the people who don't make it through cancer? It is quite intense to say that people are fighters or not fighters. You are just as unlucky to get cancer as you are lucky to make it through. We get all excited when things are going well, but if things are not going well, what does that make us? Losers? No, we have to remember that cancer is just something that happens to us.



ELZAAN

At a point I had to say to myself:
'You are enough. You are not
competing with anyone else. You
are unique and you are enough.'

Even though I'm in my third year of remission, my journey with cancer is not over. It began when I first felt a lump in my left breast. I immediately took myself for a scan, but when I asked for my results, the radiologist said the results needed to be discussed with a general surgeon. I was finally told that the lump would have to be removed and that it would take three days to get the result.

My life suddenly changed and I found myself in surgery twice in one week. When those results came back, the doctor told me: 'It's stage 3, triple-negative breast cancer.'

The news was absolutely devastating. The cancer was severe, invasive and fast-growing, so I couldn't have a mastectomy or any other form of surgery. If they opened me up, there was a risk that the cancer would spread. Instead, they decided to start me on chemotherapy, followed by radiation. I started on the strongest treatment, the Red Devil, followed by a different, lighter round of chemo, which had a whole new range of side effects.

The Red Devil made me extremely nauseous. Two weeks after my first chemo treatment, I was sitting at work when my hair started falling out in clumps. When I was first told I had cancer, somewhere in the back of my mind, I'd acknowledged to myself: 'Yes, I have cancer,' but the moment my hair started to fall out, things suddenly got real. Later that night, my mom shaved the rest

of it off for me. I stood in front of the mirror and just looked at myself. In that moment, I realised: ‘You look like a cancer patient. You are now sick.’ I no longer felt beautiful. During the chemo, I was also taking cortisone, so I gained weight. There were just so many things to process.

After the second type of chemo treatment, my fingertips were very sore, as if someone had slammed them in a car door. When I mentioned that to my doctor, he said: ‘Oh yes, I forgot to tell you, that’s also one of the side effects.’ Then my nails died, and new nails began to grow beneath them, which was really sore.

I knew I had to be strong for my friends and family, but I was trying to deal with a flood of emotions. At the time, I asked God: ‘Why me?’ I was angry and confused, but then, as I worked through my feelings, I eventually thought: ‘But why not me?’

I continued to mountain-bike, which I love. There were days when I would get really tired, but I went out there because I love the outdoors. Just being in nature and with friends and family got me through it all. Without them, I wouldn’t have made it. Mentally, I stayed strong for myself and for others around me.

Before the cancer, I had been single for a long time – then I met this guy. Everything was going really well. I believed that he was the one. He had a little boy, and the three of us were like a family. But about six months into the relationship, I found out about my cancer. From there, the relationship went downhill. At my second-last chemo treatment, I broke up with him. He just couldn’t handle seeing me like that – he really believed that I was going to die. I understand that, but he was also lying to me: Going

out with his friends but telling me he was at home, and flirting with other women while I was feeling my ugliest. I was going through so much, and I just couldn't go through that relationship anymore. I still had more chemo to get through, followed by radiation.

At the time, I was heartbroken. After everything I had gone through, the break-up and losing that little child really hurt. Even today, I think about what could have been if the cancer hadn't happened. We had done everything together. He was my best friend and the one who had got me into mountain biking. It was extremely hard to let all of that go, but I know that there is also a reason for it. There must be a reason why the cancer happened.

While I was trying to process everything in my life, I decided to compile a file that contained my whole story, along with photographs. Every night I wrote down my thoughts and feelings. That really helped me. It was one way I could look after myself.

I decided to continue working during my treatment. I would have chemo on a Wednesday, then be booked off work on the Thursday and Friday. On Monday, I was back at work again. I also worked through the radiation: I'd go for appointments, then go back to work. It helped keep my mind busy.

After my chemotherapy ended, I was given a month to rest, which was when my hair started to grow back. Then I started radiation, for 30 days, every day, except weekends. It felt like getting sunburn in exactly the same spot for 15 minutes every day. The area was very tender and red, and I couldn't wear a normal bra, or anything tight-fitting. That sensation took a long time to go away.

After that, I had to go every three months to do my breast cancer and ovarian cancer markers. And every year I have to go for the ‘big test’, when they check my lungs and abdomen, as well as my breasts.

My doctors are going to watch me closely for the next five years. After that, I still need to go for regular check-ups with my oncologist. He really believed that the cancer would return after two years, so I’m lucky that I’ve now been three years clear.

The cancer is always in the back of my mind, but I choose not to let it take over my life. I know it’s there, but I’ll continue with my check-ups and live life to its fullest. If there is a race in which to compete, I’ll do it.

During my darkest times, my mom and my friends were everything. My mom was with me through it all. She really was my rock. We had a strong bond before, but now it’s even stronger.

My friends were amazing. Even people I had seen perhaps 10 years earlier contacted me to say that they were thinking about me and that I needed to be strong. That was amazing. All of the phone calls and emails were really overwhelming, and I felt so loved and cared for. I’ve realised through this journey that it’s the small things that matter.

But, in the same way that others cared for me, I had to care for myself. At a point I had to say to myself: ‘You are enough. You are not competing with anyone else. You are unique and you are enough.’ Every day, when I go out and cycle, when I see the mountains and the blue sky, I say to myself: ‘Thank you that I am spared. Thank you. I am strong. I made it. I am enough. I am here, I am here.’



DOMINIQUE

I would walk around bald and breastless
for the rest of my life if it meant that
I could be with my children for another
20 years.

Cancer is not something that someone can truly understand unless they've been touched by it personally. Over the years, I'd encountered people with breast cancer, but I'd always just assumed that they'd be okay. It was only when I was in the midst of it myself that I came to understand the severity of this cancer and just how overwhelming it can be.

While I was breastfeeding my baby, I discovered a lump in my breast. At the time, my doctor told me that it was just a blocked milk duct, but the lump never went away. As a result, I was only diagnosed later.

I have triple-negative breast cancer. This type is a little tricky and has slightly varied diagnoses. It affects 15–20% of all breast cancer sufferers and there is no targeted treatment, besides chemotherapy and surgery. My mammogram had not showed up anything. It was only when I went for an ultrasound that they picked up the cancer.

At the time of my diagnosis, my husband and I were training for a trail race and I was in the best shape of my life. As a yoga teacher, I am super-healthy and exercise every day. I eat correctly, don't smoke, and hardly drink. I have no family history of breast cancer, either. There was nothing that could have predisposed me to it, so it came as a shock, but it also showed me that cancer does not discriminate; it's an insidious, horrific disease that just sneaks up on you.

My cancer was really difficult to process, made tougher by the fact that I have four kids. I want to be here and see them grow up, and I'm trying to deal with the possibility that that may not happen – it just depends on how my treatment goes.

Being faced with my own mortality was a big thing. I automatically switched into 'fight' mode. I'm fighting for my life. I think that trait is inherent in each of us. I don't think anyone would get a diagnosis like this and say: 'Fine, I'm going to die.' We fight, especially when we have things to fight for. It's in our DNA.

It has been a tough road – mentally more so than physically. The chemo has been doable – perhaps because I am fit, so I bounce back quickly. I'm now on my second round of chemo, which is a walk in the park compared to the first, which was the Red Devil. Most of my struggles remain in my mind.

I will get through this for my children. My husband is incredible, too. He put in place all of the support I could need: On days I have chemo, I have someone to help with the cooking; I have a nanny during the day to help with the kids; and a nanny who helps at night with the baby. My husband does everything else for me – he is an absolute Godsend.

Most importantly, I have my faith. My cancer has brought me closer to God and to Jesus and my prayers. Praying and reading my Bible get me through the day. The renewal in my faith, along with my friends and family, have been paramount.

Staying as active as possible has also helped. I still train and do trail running and hiking, which helps my body to bounce back between chemo cycles. Even on those days when I'm really tired and

can't think of anything worse than getting out of bed, I get up, put on my clothes and get outside. Just doing something is helpful.

I am so grateful for all my doctors are doing, but there is only so much that they can do. I've realised that I have to take charge of myself. I know that I'm not going to get through it by lying in bed curled up in a ball, crying all day. Yes, some days I'm very emotional, but I'm still alive and I've got a lot of fight left in me. I've just got to put my head down and do the treatment.

A couple of months ago, I was my normal self, but I'll never be that person again. Now, I'm a fighter – in a good way. I look back and wonder what on Earth I complained about before. I had always wished for this or that in my life, but I realise that I had the perfect life. I had my health.

I've realised who I really am, what makes me happy and what's most important in my life: My family and my children. I'd walk through fire for them. I need to be here for my husband, and to be a good mom. I can't think about leaving this world and them behind. It destroys me.

I am still suffering, and I'm really stressed out about my health, but I'm going to therapy and counselling to deal with it. Cancer teaches you a lot about yourself. If this is what was meant to happen to bring me to this point in my life, then so be it. Maybe I will look back in a couple of years and say: 'You know what, there was a reason for it, and it wasn't all bad.' It's not pleasant having to go through this right now, but it's making me a stronger person.

Cancer has made me more empathetic, and now I can really feel for people and their struggles. Before, I was too wound up in my own life; the next cocktail party, or the next evening out

with friends. None of that is real. I would walk around bald and breastless for the rest of my life if it meant that I could be with my children for another 20 years. At the end of the day, it has nothing to do with what you look like, it is about who you are on the inside.

I would encourage every woman, from age 20 onwards, to examine their breasts every two weeks. Your menstrual cycle changes them. If something doesn't feel right, get it checked out. I am so thankful that I went for an ultrasound. I shudder to think where I would be right now if I hadn't done that. We women get so busy, and it's easy to put things off, but don't delay your check-ups. You must put yourself first. Just because you feel well doesn't mean that you are invincible. At the time of my diagnosis, I felt the healthiest I'd ever felt.

To anyone newly diagnosed: Just know that you can do it; you can overcome. Things are not as dire as they seem. Don't be scared of the treatment or the process. It's going to change you for the better. When I was sitting in that chemo chair, it helped me to remember that I was one step closer to getting better. Chemo is a friend, and it's doing the work for you. When you come out the other side, you'll be so much stronger. Your doctors will do their job, so trust them. You'll find the reserves and strength inside yourself to do it, too. I'm not saying that it's always easy – it isn't when you're feeling sick. Some days you'll feel low, but the next day, the sun will come out, you'll wake up and be alive.

Lean into your faith. A couple of weeks ago, I was in a really bad space. I just prayed and prayed, and He kept giving me signs all the time that I'm going to be okay. I believe it. I have put all my faith in Him.

I know this sounds like a cliché, but cancer treatment is a marathon, not a sprint. You have to give the chemo time to work, and take it one day at a time. Women have gone before us. Some of them haven't made it, but many women have come out the other end. You can, too. You just have to keep the faith.



M P O P I

I want people to know that you can get through cancer and that it's not the end of the world. As a black woman, it's okay to seek help.

I was 38 when I was diagnosed with cancer. That was two years ago. Although my diagnosis came as a big shock, testing later revealed that I had cancer in my genes.

I had a lump in my left breast, and by the time I had it checked out, there was already cancerous activity in the lymph nodes. I ended up having a bilateral mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiation.

At first, I didn't want many people to know about my diagnosis – I didn't want their pity, or them to look at me differently. During my treatment, I always wore a wig and make-up when I left the house. I didn't look sick, so people only found out the truth when I told them. I eventually shared a social media post telling people my diagnosis. That was my way to reduce the stigma around my cancer, and I felt much better after that. It freed me. People received that post very well, and nobody judged me. All of my fears had simply been my own preconceived ideas that I had held about myself and my journey. In reality, it wasn't like that at all.

My chemotherapy lasted for six months and happened in four cycles for three months, and then weekly for another three months. Halfway through my last lot of chemotherapy, I thought: 'Oh my gosh, I am almost there.' Then, my white blood cell count dropped to the lowest it had ever been, and we had to stop for a week. I just broke down. I felt like I couldn't do it anymore. I cried all day, and

the tears just wouldn't stop. At that point, I made an appointment with a counsellor. She shared with me various coping strategies, which were very helpful. I know that not everybody has access to counselling and therapy, but I found it to be a very useful resource.

My friends and family really came on board, too. Someone accompanied me to every doctor's appointment, and even took notes for me while I listened to the doctor. I also had someone with me at every one of the 16 chemotherapy sessions. My friends even sent me homemade food. I really appreciated that, and it was very humbling. I hadn't realised that was what I needed, but when it happened, it was awesome. I tend to be quite self-sufficient – I'm a single person and divorced. I thought I would have to do so many things by and for myself, but it wasn't like that at all.

I want people to know that you can get through cancer and that it's not the end of the world. As a black woman, it's okay to seek help. Many black people are quite superstitious and believe that if you receive a cancer diagnosis, it's a punishment, but that's not true. I think a lot of black people keep it a secret, as I did at first, and they end up taking wrong advice from family members or the community. Fortunately, because I am a medical doctor, I didn't go into everything blindly. I also educated myself quite a bit. Of course, searching on the internet can be a rabbit hole, but my medical training did help me.

My cancer has definitely made me more resilient. I didn't have any other option but to face it head-on. There were moments when it was tough. I didn't think I would be able to finish all 16 rounds of chemo, but by the time the last session came, I really felt like I had

a reason to celebrate. So, we had a little party in the chemo room. There were so many of us in there – even balloons. It was such a joyful time.

I think my whole cancer journey has made me softer and more empathetic, especially towards my own patients. After all, I am now a patient, too. I now understand the anxiety, fear, frustrations, and also perhaps the impatience that comes with being ill. I am a surgeon, and it's the same when you have surgery: You wonder when the healing is going to be complete. When complications arise, you have to accept that as part of the process, too. In my case, my cancer has spread to my lymph nodes. So, I have lymphedema on the left side, and I have to have treatment for that, and I wear compression garments. That is, unfortunately, one of the complications that arose as a result of the extent of the disease and the treatment that I received. I have learnt to become a little more accepting when things don't go as well as I hope.

I am definitely more self-aware now. I'm more grateful, too, and I don't take my life for granted. I think that although I wouldn't call myself a philanthropist, I am definitely keener to give back to my community – to the breast cancer community, too.

To anyone else in the same position, I would advise: Don't listen to the background noise from everyone else. Yes, we have breast cancer, but we don't all have the same breast cancer, and so we don't all need the same treatment. Listen to what your medical team tells you – and stay off the internet!

I am so grateful to everyone who has looked after me so far – from the doctors to the nurses and my counsellor. I feel so

privileged to be a health worker, and to know that there are things that I do that improve people's lives in some way. It has made me more appreciative of my job, too – my calling.



L O R I - A N N E

I often use the quote: ‘*Memento vivere*,’ which means: ‘Remember to live.’ It’s important to me that I don’t get stuck in the yesterdays and tomorrows and the what-ifs. I just need to try.

My cancer really came as a shock to me. I had lost my dad to stage 4 lung cancer in the August, and then in the October, I was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer myself. Even though I had walked alongside my father, I wasn't at all prepared for my own journey.

I had gone for mammograms every year since I turned 40, but when I turned 47, my gynaecologist said that I could go every second year, instead. So, I skipped the year I turned 48.

The following year, I had felt a lump in my breast before my mammogram, but the doctor had told me that he thought it was an inflammatory reaction. However, the mammogram picked up something, so I went for a biopsy that same day.

On the Friday, I received my diagnosis. I don't think anything can ever prepare you for the moment you find out that you have cancer. My husband and I don't have children, and he told me that he was not ready to be on his own. My first thought was that I was going to die. In stage 4, they generally don't treat you to cure you; they treat you to lengthen your life. It's a systemic disease that had gone everywhere. So, my husband was obviously upset, and so was I. There was so much I still wanted to do in this life.

That following Monday, I went for all of my bone scans and CT scans. They found three cancerous nodules in my liver. It's hard,

because breast cancer is such a curable disease, but when the pendulum swings to stage 4, the expected outcome is not that great.

I have now gone through all of the treatment. Two weeks after starting my Red Devil chemotherapy, I lost my hair. I didn't want to walk around with a bald head. I know that some people feel okay with it, but I felt that it gave people the opportunity to feel sorry for me, and I didn't want that. The thing is, I didn't feel sick, but I looked it. Every morning that I woke up and looked in the mirror and saw my bald head, it was a reminder that I was sick. During the weeks when I got my Red Devil, I was tired and nauseous, but then by weeks two and three, I could go on as normal. The chemotherapy I had after that didn't affect me much.

After I lost my hair, I started wearing scarves. I am a Pilates teacher, so a scarf always got in the way. Either I tied the thing so tight that it gave me a headache, or it was too loose and fell into my eyes. It irritated me. I'm a creative person, so I reverted to an online, image-sharing site and decided to make my own hats. I now have people who sew for me. I have one lady who makes the flowers, and another who makes a jockey hat and a beret type of hat.

After all of my Red Devils, I went for a scan. The cancer was shrinking. I then had to undergo a mastectomy, when they tested my breast tissue. My type of cancer, triple-negative, HER2-positive, is an extremely aggressive breast cancer, but it was amazing – I was completely clean. There was no cancer anywhere. The doctors couldn't even find microscopic traces. All of the nodules in my liver had gone, too. One of my oncologists calls me a 'medical unicorn'. This doesn't happen often, so I obviously feel extremely blessed.

The thing is, I never prayed to be cured or healed, but I did say to people: ‘You need to pray me through this,’ because I felt I couldn’t have the audacity to ask God to heal me. He has a plan. So, every time I went for tests and lay under that CT scanner or MRI machine, I prayed that I would be content with the results, whatever they were.

This hasn’t been easy – it’s actually been very scary. My husband always says that we are one scan away from a disaster. There is that fear of: What if it comes back? It’s very real. But, at the end of the day, I’m extremely grateful.

The process of living through the cancer is hard. Nothing can prepare you for that. After going through the process with my dad and then being diagnosed myself, I realised how we try to help our friends and family feel better about things. I found that I had to be strong, and I tended to minimise how I felt and what was going on in my head. I didn’t want the people around me to see that I wasn’t doing well. I realise now how my dad tried to protect us, too.

When I went for treatment, there were always at least five to 10 girls with me, supporting me. It was amazing. Even during those times when I was very tired, people used to make food and then pop by. I thought to myself: ‘This is not forever. It is going to blow over one of these days.’ I always felt that when I could, I needed to give back.

Out of my journey came meaning in my life. I now pay it forward with my hats. Every three weeks, I go to get my injection. I like to encourage the people sitting in the treatment room who have lost their hair by offering them a hat. I chat to them, give them

my number and invite them to join a support group. I want them to realise that it's going to be okay, no matter what they are going through. I advise them to just 'try and do' for today. That's my philosophy. I always say that you can have many friends, but it's the one who has walked the mile in your shoes who can relate to you. When people phone and tell me they are scared, I can say: 'I know, I also feel scared.'

When you have breast cancer, you still want to get on with your life. I still want people to talk to me – but not just about breast cancer. I found that when I was wearing a hat, people would say: 'Your hat is beautiful,' and they wouldn't concentrate on the cancer. That was just what I needed. It has been great to see how people to whom I have given hats have come back to me and said that their hats have given them the confidence to go out in public again.

I used to hate public speaking, but I have been given the opportunity to speak at different places and share my story, so over time that has become easier, too.

God is important in my life: It's not my way, it's His way. I am just an instrument and I need to use my life, what I get, what I accomplish, and what I don't, and make the best of my situation.

Being a survivor is a mental game. The hardest bit is going for the next scan and not knowing what is going to happen. I will be on treatment for the rest of my life to keep my cancer at bay. It makes me tired, but for me, it's all about meaning: It's about waking up and feeling excited to get new materials to make new hats. I have also started a social media page for my hats, and have started a store basically for breast cancer patients. I try to stay positive, and people often tell me that I give them hope.

I often use the quote: ‘*Memento vivere*,’ which means: ‘Remember to live.’ It’s important to me that I don’t get stuck in the yesterdays and tomorrows, and the what-ifs. I just need to try. Just try, and just focus on today.

I am grateful that I got cancer. My life is better for it. I’m building relationships and encouraging people while creating a platform for breast cancer patients. After cancer, you are never the same, and you never think about anything the same way again, either.

Although I am in remission, it hangs over my head like a dark cloud, but I think for me, it is just about feeling grateful and blessed every day. That gets me through. When I get a smiling photo of someone wearing a hat, I know that it’s all worth it.



RAY

I discovered that sharing my journey empowered me. The more you use the word ‘cancer’, the less power it holds.

I was diagnosed with cancer when I was 46. When I found my own breast lump, I didn't give cancer a thought. Still, I went to the doctor, who sent me for a mammogram, and then an ultrasound.

When it was confirmed as cancer, I was so shocked that I became numb. At first, I thought that I was going to die, but then I thought about my sons. They were still teenagers and in school at the time. I had to find a way to survive. At that time, I had stage 3 cancer, but today, I have stage 4 metastatic cancer. It is incurable, and my cancer is advanced, but I still have to find a way to survive.

When I went through treatment, I tried to find something positive in each day. For instance, when I lost my hair, one of my sons said that I didn't look good. I said to him: 'I am saving on shampoo and blow-drying!' From my positive attitude, my children developed a faith that I would pull through.

During the day, I was sick alone at home, but I never cried ... I couldn't cry – I think I was still too in shock from everything that was happening.

At that time, I started support groups for breast cancer to help create awareness through my own journey. I discovered that sharing my journey empowered me. The more you use the word 'cancer', the less power it holds. I never realised that sharing my journey

would be inspirational to others, too. People told me that I gave them hope and educated them.

Over the years, I have continued to share my journey and tell my story. According to the science, I have passed my expiry date. My doctors told me that if I made it to five years, I would be lucky, but it has been 15 years now.

When I found out that I was in stage 4, I was shocked. I was on medication for four years and 10 months. I finished chemotherapy and radiation, and then my tumour marker reading went up, so I was sent for a bone scan. Apparently, once cancer is in the bone, you don't live for longer than six years. I have now been living with it in the bone for 11 years! Perhaps, according to science, I shouldn't be alive, but I am. Maybe that has something to do with my attitude and the way I deal with the cancer.

I believe it's 20% treatment, 80% your mind. It is all about the 'ABCs': Attitude, Belief and Choice. Attitude: Surround yourself with people who add value to your life. Belief: You have to believe in yourself; no one else can choose to be happy for you. Choice: I always say that cancer chose me, and I choose not to own it.

Cancer taught me to count my blessings. Before, my aim would have been to buy things, like a new fridge, stove or car, but cancer really did change my life. I am now grateful for every day. I am grateful for waking up – and for waking up without pain. I take medication, which has all sorts of side effects. When something goes wrong in my body, I never think it could be cancer – I just think that I'm getting older. Our thoughts are powerful.

What do we fear when we fear cancer? We fear death, but death is a part of life. I had to start making peace with that. It is

not something that we can control, so why stress about it? I don't stress about death, although I used to fear it. It's going to happen sometime. I always say that the tragedy of life is not death; it is being alive and not living life. It is not the years in your life that matter, but the life in your years.

After my cancer diagnosis, I started hiking. For me it was very healing: I was in competition with myself. Sometimes, I don't even think I was present with the hikers around me. If it hadn't been for the cancer, I never would have done that. Before the cancer, I did nothing. I just had my four boys, and I had my job, but cancer was a wake-up call. I used the opportunity to seek out every challenge, and I now try to grow continuously. If what I'm doing turns out to be a bad life lesson, then I try to take the lesson, empower myself, and perhaps even share it with others.

I have hiked every Sunday for more than 10 years. For me, there are healing powers in the mountains. Then I joined a running club. I started with 5km, went up to 10km, then to 15km. I think I have done more than 75 half-marathons over 15 years.

Happy feelings are healing feelings. If you feel happy, you heal. I am oestrogen-positive, so the hormone causes my breast cancer. When you run, it reroutes the oestrogen, so I never stopped running. Every day, I go for a run.

My son always says that I am the queen of second opinions and of never giving up. I was told that I had cancer first in the breast, then in the breastbone. Then I was told that I had cancer in my jaw. I was devastated, so I went for a second opinion. That confirmed that it wasn't cancer, but a disease caused by the cancer treatment.

I really have to apply my mind to get through everything. My situation is so bad that I apparently even have cancer in my scalp. The treatment causes memory loss, hair loss, bone ache, muscle pain, insomnia, and depression. Still, I wake up every day and ensure that I have a good day.

For 42 years, I worked non-stop, and retired recently. I may have retired from my job, but I haven't retired from life. I carry on with my cancer buddy work, and I do volunteer work in the hospitals on a daily basis. If I can make a difference in one patient's life, it means a lot to me.

I also joined a breast cancer team that does dragonboat paddling. I travelled with the team to Canada and Malaysia. My son also invited me to go to the Philippines. Our trip was like a spiritual journey for me. We went from one island to the other, snorkelling. I compared that to real life: To see the beauty of the ocean, you have to swim deep. Sometimes, the water is stormy, but you have to swim. It's the same with life. To see the beauty of life, you have to dig deep. I had to go through cancer to see the beauty of the world. If it weren't for cancer, I would never have left my home town.

Cancer was an eye-opener for me. When I do my cancer talks, I tell people to start living now, no matter how old they are. When people tell me that they can't, I tell them that I couldn't either, but look where I am today.

God only sends his strongest people to battle, and you know, whatever happens to you is manageable. Although I am on all of these treatments, it's still manageable. You cannot go over it or around it, you have to go through it. The minute you sit down and are negative, that's when you won't survive. There are '3Ps' I live

by: Prayer, Perseverance and Patience. That's what you need for this journey. You need to be patient, and your health is your wealth.

After cancer, I really started finding my life. I wouldn't have known I was this strong if cancer hadn't happened to me. Sometimes, I wonder where this strength comes from. You get people who say: 'I fight cancer,' but I don't fight it, I accept it. It's a challenge, but I work through it. You get people who say that they kicked cancer's ass. I'm not here to kick it. I accept and acknowledge it, and I work through whatever comes my way.

If you are diagnosed with cancer, don't give up. Get a second opinion, and have a conversation with your doctor. They don't know everything – they learn from our experiences. If they tell you that you only have a certain time left to live, don't believe it. Look where I am today, at 62. Don't give up. This is just a bend, not the end.



R E N A T E

Yes, there are some good things that came out of my illness – in fact, many good things. Of course, there are negatives, too, but I know I need to learn from them. I'll keep on looking for the positives and moving forward.

My journey through cancer was pretty rough, but as the years have passed, I've tried to stay positive about it and to move forward. I always say that the one big positive to come out of it is that I now have small boobs – which is really great because I run and cycle. They used to be pretty big!

Cancer was horrible at the time, but what stands out most was that I really learnt who my friends are; and how much people were prepared to, and wanted to, support me. You don't realise who is around you until you actually find yourself feeling so helpless. I was also lucky to have a phenomenal husband who took over my life while I was sick. His help allowed me to focus on myself and my wellbeing.

My running really kept me sane through my cancer treatment. I wasn't working at the time, so there was no real structure in my life, except for my runs. My running friends supported me all the way. I knew that the girls met every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning at 8am. They would be there, so I knew I had to go, too: I had to get up, put on my clothes and just get there. After that, I could forget about everything else.

We were all strong runners, yet on every single run they made a plan for me. It was the little things they did that meant so much. One of the girls would walk up with a beanie and say: 'Listen, I

remembered your beanie.’ Somebody else would walk with me when I didn’t have the energy to run. No matter how slowly I walked, someone would always walk with me. When I ran, someone would run with me, and I would feel better. They just stuck with me and they’re amazing. While I was out there running, I could keep my mind off everything else; I had moments of positivity and felt good again. My husband and son’s positivity were incredibly helpful, too.

I had a dog I absolutely loved, and he was always there for me, too. He used to sit and watch me, and just be with me through the long hours spent in front of the toilet bowl. It would be quiet and dark, at about 2am. Every time I vomited, he would lift his head and look at me with concern. He was phenomenal.

At one stage, I did feel quite alone because I didn’t know anyone who had been through my type of cancer. After some internet research, I found an online support group specifically for women with HER2 cancer. My diagnosis had been triple-positive, HER2-positive, progesterone-positive and oestrogen-positive cancer. The girls there were incredibly helpful. We were all going through the same type of thing, and they could understand my side effects and treatment. I learnt so much from that group.

I never wanted to get sucked into depression. Every day I told myself: ‘Get up and out of bed; make the bed; get out of the bedroom; brush your hair – even when it began falling out – put on a hat and go for a walk. Just do something!’ I told myself not to stay in ‘that’ negative space because it could become even more negative, so I would go for walks to try to feel more positive.

When my head grew sensitive from wearing wigs, my son and his girlfriend arrived one Saturday afternoon with a big bag

containing the weirdest selection of hats, scarves and beanies that they'd collected from their friends. I wore a lot of them and donated them later. That little gesture really stands out. I realised then that there were people around me who wanted to help me.

To other cancer sufferers facing challenges, I say: Keep yourself occupied and don't focus on the negatives. There is so much else going on around you. Go and find a sport that you enjoy; find something to do, like a hobby. Get yourself out of any negative environment and move! I spent a lot of time running, walking and doing things – anything.

Many people think that cancer is the end of the road – but it's not. You have to get out there. One day, you are at a certain point in your life, and the next minute, you'll find yourself somewhere else – as long as you keep moving. Cancer is the hand that life has dealt to us, and how we handle it depends on our attitude. There is life after cancer.

Yes, there are some good things that came out of my illness – in fact, many good things. Of course, there are negatives, too, but I know that I need to learn from them. I'll keep on looking for the positives and moving forward.



AYESHA

It has taken two years for me to be able to say to myself: 'It's not anything you've done. It's just one of those things that happen.'

Looking back, events that led to my cancer began when I was only 14 years old – but I wouldn't realise that until many years later, when I was diagnosed at age 33.

I was 14, and I visited a local theme park. I remember standing in a two-hour-long queue for a ride. The person in front of me was talking and waving his arms around. As he turned, he elbowed me in the side of my left breast. The pain was terrible. My doctor said not to worry about it, but if it bothered me, I should visit a breast clinic.

So, my mom took me to one. They told me that I was still young, that it was probably a bruise, and that I should take evening primrose oil. The pain subsided, but there still seemed to be a swelling inside my breast. Every time I got my period, my breast hurt, but I just never worried about it. I would go on to have three children and breastfeed them all.

In June 2018, my brother passed away, two weeks before his wedding. My brother and I were only a year and 10 months apart in age. We were like twins. We did everything together. I was the one who had to give him CPR. He was just yanked out of our lives. I tried to be strong, but I was falling apart. In the August, my cat, who was like my child, had to be put down. And then I got my diagnosis ... I didn't know how much more I could take.

I had developed a really bad pain in my breast, which went on for several days. When it started to burn, I got worried. My doctor didn't think there was anything to be concerned about, but referred me to a local public hospital for my own peace of mind.

I managed to get an appointment a month later. I sat there for six hours – from 6am until after 12pm. They did several biopsies right there and then.

Two weeks later, I was asked to return. The biopsy was clear and everything appeared normal, but I was referred for an ultrasound. Two weeks after that, I was informed that nothing had been visible on the ultrasound because the tissue had been distorted by the biopsies. I had to have further biopsies.

Two weeks later, I again waited for six hours. The queueing patients were separated into two groups, although they wouldn't tell us why. But I knew. I had seen the face of the person who had gone in before me.

When it was finally my turn, I couldn't believe it: There was the same doctor I had seen when I was 14, who had told me that there was nothing wrong with my breast. He was the one who then informed me that I had an aggressive form of breast cancer.

Although I shared the news with my husband, I didn't tell anyone else for about three months. My mother was taking my brother's death hard, so I didn't want to put my cancer on her, too. Hiding it from my family was really difficult. For the next three months, I put on a show and pretended that I was perfectly fine. It was very lonely. While I was smiling on the outside, my entire body was aching. I only ended up telling my mother in the February, when I fell ill. After that, the journey became far easier.

I never had chemotherapy, and I still don't intend having it, although I have since had radiation and hormone therapy. Not having chemo is my personal choice, but I've felt very judged for that decision. I was diagnosed in December, and in January I went to see a surgeon at a private hospital. I asked if he could just remove my breast, since I was willing to have the mastectomy. At that time, the cancer was localised – it was only a 4cm lump. He told me that if I didn't do the chemo, followed by radiation and hormone therapy, I would be dead by March. He said that my husband and kids would have to pick up the pieces with a new wife and mother. I went to see five or six other surgeons, who all refused to remove the lump if I didn't go for chemo. Two years later, I'm still walking around.

I don't think I would be able to stand chemo. I would rather have a quality life than go through that simply for quantity, where my family have to carry me for the next 10 years. Perhaps I will only have five years of life, but it will be five full years. I'm going with that. My husband is fine with it, and my family is okay with it, too.

When I was diagnosed, I was about 10kg overweight. I was told that my lifestyle was to blame, so that's what I tried to change. I went to see many homeopathic doctors, who told me that stress does play a part in cancer because of the emotional strain it places on the body.

When you have cancer, they prepare you for your hair and nails falling out, but not for the emotions that come with your diagnosis. It was a mentally tough road. I would wake up in the middle of the night with panic and anxiety attacks. I wondered whether I would get to see my kids' birthdays ... I also tried to figure out why I had

got cancer. I can deal with the aches and the pains, but to get past my own way of thinking was really difficult. For so long I tried to figure out what I did wrong ... Did I take too many painkillers? Did I stress too much? Did I overwork? I don't drink alcohol, do drugs, eat pork or even many take-outs – none of the things that people usually say are bad for you.

I tried to change my habits, and started on a plant-based diet, but the cancer didn't go away. It has taken two years for me to be able to say to myself: 'It's not anything you've done. It's just one of those things that happen.' My cancer was triggered by something that happened when I was 14. Apparently, sometimes when an injury doesn't heal itself, a mutation occurs that then becomes malignant. It was random and it surfaced 20 years later.

I do believe there's a stigma attached to getting cancer. When I thought about breast cancer, I associated it with a 50-year-old woman. I never thought I would get a diagnosis like that at 33. It was an entire year before I even told my colleagues at the school where I teach, but once they knew, they viewed and treated me differently. I felt like they saw me as a vulnerable person who needed care. Every time they spoke to me, they asked about the cancer, instead of just asking how I was. I know they meant well, but it gets a bit much. I just want to be normal.

When it comes to interacting with cancer patients, my advice would be: Don't approach somebody with pity. We just want people to look at us the way they did before the diagnosis. When you speak to me, I'm still me. I'm not a walking cancer cell. I'm still Ayesha, I'm still the teacher, the mommy and the runner (even though I can't run very far anymore). I love to go out; I love to dance; I love

to sing – even if people don't like to listen to me singing. I still do everything I did before, perhaps not as often or as energetically, but I'm still me.

I resigned from my job. After the national COVID-19 lockdown in which schools were closed, I wanted to go back to school to teach, but I was told that I needed to stay at home because I was sickly. I don't feel sick, and if I can still get up and go to school, I want to be allowed to do so, but they insisted I stay at home. There were so many dynamics around my cancer at play, and I can't be in an environment like that, so I removed myself. I now stay at home with my kids. I am far more tired, but it's so much better!

Sometimes, I think my diagnosis was a blessing in disguise. Once you receive the news, your entire life comes down to that instant. I no longer think about what is going to happen next month; I think about what is going to happen at 3.30pm.

I am not going to dwell on how sick I was on Monday, otherwise I'll completely lose my mind. If I think: 'Oh my gosh, maybe tomorrow I won't be able to get up,' it's going to stop me from doing what I want to do today. If I'm having a good day today, great. If anybody asks me how I am, I always say that I am okay today, but ask me again tomorrow.

I can't tell myself to only be positive because I'm not always going to be positive. The more I try to do that, the harder it gets. I just have to go with what's happening and deal with it as it comes. Some days will be easy, and others will be hard. Everybody's life is hard; I just have this one added burden to carry.

I don't want my children to see Mommy giving up, because I wouldn't want them to do that. If I do pass away tomorrow, I

want my children to know that Mommy was strong until the end. Sometimes it's hard. On my down days, I ask myself: 'Am I doing the right thing by not having chemo?' But then on others, I know I've made the right choice. Perhaps tomorrow, I'll doubt myself again.

I've always made my own decisions. This is just one of many. I've had a tough 35 years, so I think I can handle this extra little burden that has been gifted to me. It's just one of those curve balls, and I have to go with it. My motto in life is now: 'It's okay.' My mom had a stroke many years ago and was completely paralysed on the right-hand side. Six months later, she was walking. That's my inspiration right there.

It's important to remember: You could be the healthiest person, but your time on Earth could be up tomorrow, or you could have stage 4 breast cancer and still live another 25 years.

To anyone newly diagnosed, I want you to know: It's not your fault. Live now, just do things now, and don't worry about what happened yesterday.



S A R A H

I love my cancer. It was the best thing to ever happen to me. It has taught me more about love, acceptance and surrender than anything else could have done.

I turned 40 without much celebration, but feeling quite accepting of my age. I went for my yearly check-up with my gynaecologist and, as always, he checked my breasts for lumps, then said: 'You're all good.' He added that, since I'd turned 40, I should consider getting a mammogram. I was very much into naturopathic medicine at that stage and had heard reports that mammograms could be dangerous, so I resisted the idea and put it out of my mind.

A little while later, I found a lump in my breast that my gynaecologist hadn't detected. I realised that if I wanted help, I had to surrender to the idea of a mammogram and biopsy.

Both of the tests revealed precancer – stage 0. I was told the 'good news' – that my life could be saved by having a double mastectomy. Then I started getting advice from everyone around me on different ways to deal with my condition. That can be really confusing. I eventually came to the conclusion that I didn't need surgery. I was going to heal myself!

I cancelled my surgery. My surgeon was horrified. He said: 'You have two small children. I really don't think you should do this.' Still, he told me that since it was precancer, I should take the time to get comfortable with the idea of the surgery.

I tend to need time to process things, so I dived into meditation and yoga and all of my spiritual practices to really connect with myself. I finally picked up the phone to make another booking.

The surgery went well, and I believed that after I healed a bit, I could get back to my normal life. But that wasn't to be.

While the surgeon was removing my bandages, he said: 'Sarah, I am really sorry, but you have stage 2 cancer. We found two tumours in your left breast, hidden deep down close to the bone. We also found cancer in your lymph nodes. This is life-threatening, and you are going to have to have chemotherapy, radiation and hormone therapy.'

I was completely shocked. Suddenly, I was facing the worst imaginable outcome: Chemotherapy. That word wracked me with horror, and the thought kept running through my head: 'You are going to die and leave behind a four-year-old and a 15-month-old baby. How are they going to survive without you?'

I sunk deep into fear. I was going to die – that was all I could think about. Despite my terror, I put on a brave face to the world. Inside, I was truly terrified – I feared my life was over.

I felt cheated and I was angry. I thought: 'Haven't I suffered enough?' I'd lost my daughter in a stillbirth; my husband had been left unemployed after a back injury, and I'd been under severe financial stress. I'd been through so much in my life already – and then the cancer... It felt so unfair, and I felt really sorry for myself.

Out of fear, I began to rigidly control my life. I was given six weeks to heal from the surgery before beginning chemotherapy. I went vegan overnight and dropped about 6kg before even starting

chemo. I kept a file and wrote notes; I saw all sorts of spiritual healers; took Chinese medicine and went for acupuncture. I was doing that work as a panic response.

My homeopath was one of my angels who carried me through. When I took her my diagnosis, she said: 'Sarah, if you don't do this chemotherapy – which I know is incredibly toxic to the body – you are going to die. Do the chemo and I will look after your body, liver, bladder, kidneys, brain and your veins. I am going to hold your hand and we are going to do this.' I don't think I would have been able to do it without her.

I had to do three rounds of the Red Devil. I realised that I had to send my body the right message. On my way to chemo that first day, I spoke to my body and said: 'You need to understand that I am going to be putting a toxic drug through your system, and it is going to feel like I am killing you, but I am saving you. Trust me. I am asking you to surrender and I will support you.' I came through that first round without any side effects.

For the second round, I was still feeling positive, but that one nailed me and I really struggled physically. I had started seeing a dietician, who told me to stop the veganism and to eat as much meat as I could. I pivoted my diet to bone broth, steak and eggs.

Each day I woke up feeling worse. I remember one particular day not being able to get out of bed, or being able to move. All I remember was the light changing. I heard the birds singing and then going quiet. My husband kept the kids away from me. I could hear their voices in the background as they played, but I was so detached from them. I was helpless. I just had to surrender. After

how fiercely I had controlled my life, that word, 'surrender', became my biggest lesson.

By the time I had my third round of the Red Devil, I felt close to death. I had never been curvaceous, but I'd shed all of my body fat and weighed only 44kg. I'd also lost all of my hair. When I looked in the mirror, a 70-year-old woman stared back at me. My skin just hung. I still hadn't had proper reconstructive surgery, so my breasts looked mutilated.

I have always been an attractive woman and had often focused on my physical looks. I lost all of that so quickly. As much as I tried to look feminine, I just looked rough. Where previously people had looked at me with admiration, they either avoided me, pretended they didn't know me, or told me horror stories about people they knew who had died from cancer. I didn't want to hear about people dying of cancer, I wanted to hear about people surviving!

Still, in those moments, staring into the mirror, I kind of fell in love with myself. I knew that I was more than the external, and I needed to be stripped of all of that to come to the realisation that I am not my physical body. That is just a casing around me. Beauty radiates outwards. At that point, I started loving myself in a completely different way.

Armed with my folder, I was doing all of the 'right things'. Then a friend of mine gave me a book called *The C Word*. It is the story of a British author and comedian who was diagnosed with stage 2 cancer – the exact same diagnosis as me. The book was raw and real. She was tough and funny and laughed and cried. I thought she was amazing.

The book, written 10 years earlier, ends a year after the author's treatment. One night I decided to look her up online. I thought: 'She has probably done so well ... If she can do it, I can do it.' She died three years after her treatment ended. Exactly the same diagnosis as me. Her treatment went well, and her chemo went well. She was clear, but she died anyway. It went to her brain and she died quickly.

I just crumbled. 'I am going to die. I am doing all of this for nothing. I am just going to die,' I thought.

That night, I lay on the floor, sobbing. I said: 'I give up completely. I surrender. I am letting go of everything: The process, the healing, every note I have written. This is not in my control. If I need to die, then I will die. And if I live, then let me live differently, because clearly the way I am living is not working.'

I was no longer afraid to die. I still feared leaving my children, but my husband is an incredible father, and he will take care of them. I have two sisters, and they have grandparents, too. My children will be fine. If I need to go, I need to go.

I think that's when my healing started – about halfway through my chemo. Then I was given another book, also about cancer. I looked up that woman, too. Not only did she survive, but she now travels the world speaking about it. She embraced her cancer as her biggest teacher. That is what saved her.

That perspective completely changed my attitude. I said: 'Thank you, cancer. I am going to embrace you with my whole heart. I am going to surrender to you, and I am going to learn the lesson that you have come to teach me.'

I got through the chemo and the radiation and my fear started falling away. Instead of seeing myself as sick, I saw myself healing, and as strong, powerful and beautiful. My body started to regenerate, and very quickly started adapting to that new vision. With an amazing team of natural healers around me, I did some detoxes and began blossoming again.

That moment of surrender changed everything for me. I am a naturally fearful person, so I still find myself getting drawn back into the fear, but then I remember what fear did for me. I lived 40 years in fear, so how am I going to live my next 40 years? Because I *am* going to live another 40 years! I no longer believe that I am going to die young.

I have finally let go of fear and now live in such a beautifully different way. I know what joy is. Through my illness, I have been given amazing insight, for which I am so grateful.

I love my cancer. It was the best thing to ever happen to me. It has taught me more about love, acceptance and surrender than anything else could have done. I want to help others to not be afraid of their diagnosis and to embrace their cancer, too. Fear is part of the journey, and cancer will open your heart. Thanks to cancer, I am healthier, fitter, stronger and more intuitive than I have ever been. I am grateful for it.



LINDIWE

Always remember: Cancer is being researched every day. What might feel impossible today, could be possible tomorrow. Get up, and don't give up.

My cancer journey began when a childhood friend passed away from cancer. After her death, we friends asked among ourselves: ‘Have you had a mammogram?’ We realised that not one of us had even thought about it. In the African community, if you have diabetes, we understand it, and if you have a heart condition, we understand that, too, but cancer does not seem to be that prevalent in our community. I decided to have a check-up.

My doctor gave me the paperwork to go have a mammogram, but then it just sat in my car. Several months later, I had to see my doctor for some other tests, so I asked him to organise the mammogram at the same time. Soon after that, I received a phone call from my doctor. Something of concern had shown up on the mammogram and I needed to see a surgeon. Still, no alarm bells rang in me, and I left it. About two weeks later, I happened to mention my doctor’s call to my family, who urged me to do it right away.

The surgeon I saw requested another mammogram and then did a biopsy. Still, I was very casual about it and never thought about cancer – it could be anything, I thought. When the doctor told me that I had cancer, I thought he was talking to somebody behind me. I couldn’t tell you what else happened that day, or even how I drove myself home. I was in deep shock.

I had stage 1 breast cancer, and my breast needed to be removed. The following week, I met with both an oncologist and a genetic specialist. My four brothers are all much older than me, and they confirmed to me that there was cancer in our family. Apparently, my mother had cancer, too, but I hadn't known it. I had only been five years old at the time.

By the time I went in for my mastectomy, my cancer had become aggressive and progressed to stage 2. It was in my lymph nodes. My surgery was followed by chemotherapy.

I had always thought of myself as super-mom who could perform miracles, but chemo really knocked me. I felt like I was constantly in a boxing ring: Every time I got up and felt stronger, chemo would knock me back down again.

When the chemo finally ended, I went back to work. It took time to get into it again and for my patience to grow, but I am now loving it more than ever before. The support from my school, along with that of my family, got me through everything. Both of my parents have passed away, but all four of my brothers were there for me every single day. My friends were also there, as were my neighbours and community. I also knew that I had to pick myself up because I have children, and they still needed their mother. One day, my daughter said to me: 'Mom, please don't die.' I knew then that I didn't have a choice.

I prayed a lot during that time. Each evening, I would read, then pray and then meditate. I did that every single day until I had chemotherapy, when I no longer had control over my body, but then I did what I could with the strength I had.

I have since learnt to look after myself better. I was always giving out, and always worried about others. In some instances, those people didn't even need me to do that for them. I have had to realise that if I'm going to be there for those I love, I need to listen to my body and take time for me, too. That helped me to build deeper relationships with my children.

Cancer is not a nice thing to have, but it is also not the end of the world. Some people don't have a community, but it doesn't matter if you're alone. You need to have a positive mind and gain strength from within yourself. Think of the future that you want to have, and if you focus on those things, you'll be fine. Always remember: Cancer is being researched every day. What might feel impossible today, could be possible tomorrow. Get up, and don't give up. Cancer is not a death sentence.



A N E S H K A

Although I won't let cancer
define me, I've had to accept
that it's a part of me. My story
has made me who I am today.

I am only 23 years old, but I have had cancer twice, during my student years. Despite this, I managed to complete my degree in Engineering.

In my first year of studies, I was involved in a toxic relationship that affected me badly. Over the course of that year, I began feeling increasingly sick. I had no idea what was wrong with me, and my partner at the time didn't believe that I was really ill. That helped end the relationship! At the end of August, I went to see my GP, who misdiagnosed me with diabetes. I stuck with the diabetes medication for a month, but I just grew sicker and sicker. Eventually, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma. I started treatment, but continued to attend lectures. I even wrote my exams while I was having chemotherapy. Somehow, I managed to pass that year with an exemption.

That was the first time I had cancer. During that time, I never sat at home feeling sorry for myself – I just didn't have time to think about it. I stayed busy and went on with my life and studies. Perhaps my resilience had something to do with the fact that I was only 19 at the time.

Still, there was a lot to process. I was completely incapable of managing or accepting the fact that I had cancer, and when I first had chemotherapy, my hair thinned out, but I never lost it

completely, which made things easier. I finished my last round of chemotherapy at the beginning of February the following year, and I enjoyed almost two cancer-free years after that. Then, during my third year of studies, I started feeling pressure on my chest again. I thought perhaps I was just suffering from anxiety, but my doctor suggested a blood test. My blood cell count came back a little high, but not enough to warrant immediate concern.

Before the cancer, I had never been a sickly person, but in the middle of November, I started to vomit. It was weird because I never vomited. I hadn't even vomited during my first round of chemo. But there I was, supposedly no longer sick, and vomiting up everything I ate.

Then I thought perhaps my illness was being caused by stress. At that stage, I was working on a huge project and had been staying up until 2am every morning. I hoped that when I handed in the project the following week, I would start to feel better. The project ended, but nothing changed. So, I went to see my GP. I suggested that I could be sick again, but he said: 'No,' and that he knew what he was doing. He was no help at all – I am no longer with that doctor.

I went back to my oncologist the very same day and told him that I had lost 10kg in a month-and-a-half and that I was vomiting constantly. I was sent for a scan, and we got the results the same day: Hodgkin's lymphoma again. Since it affected the thymus gland, it was in a very difficult place to remove. The first time around, it had gone straight to the gland in my neck, but the second time, it hadn't spread. It just sat there, in the shape of a rugby ball: 10cm x 6cm. It

was really big, which explained why I had battled to swallow. I was admitted to hospital for a biopsy, but the growth was so big that my lungs were folded around it. My doctor would have had to have gone through my lungs and risked puncturing them in the process. Instead, I was diagnosed based on my previous cancer. Thankfully, my doctors were right. Treatment started right away – and I finished my third-year exams simultaneously.

The treatment plan began with very intense chemotherapy every second week, which involved a four-day hospital stay each time. The first time I was diagnosed, I had only gone into hospital for four hours. The second time around, during each four-day stint, two days involved chemo, and days three and four were for cortisone treatment. That went on for quite a while.

My doctors had explained upfront that chemotherapy would be followed by a bone marrow transplant. I was informed that my chances of having children in the future were slim, but that I could freeze my eggs. Because I was only 23 years old at the time, that seemed like a plan. A week later, I received bad news: The procedure to have my eggs removed and frozen would involve hormone treatment and surgery. At that stage, it was just too expensive an option for me. I felt like I had been told that I had no options, which was awful. That was hard on me.

I continued with the chemotherapy, and then in the February, when I was scheduled to have the bone marrow transplant, my doctors said that the chemo hadn't shrunk the gland enough. So, I had chemo once a week for three days for the following month. That was quite intense. In April, I went for my bone marrow transplant. I was still studying then, so it was quite a difficult time.

The first week was fine: I just sat there while they gave me intense chemo. I felt a bit 'off', but I didn't really feel ill. On the Sunday, my doctor warned me that from that point on, I wouldn't feel great. Basically, the chemo they had given me that week had killed everything in my body. By the following Sunday, I couldn't even speak to anyone. That second week was truly terrible, and I still can't remember everything that happened. I do know that along with a blood infection, my chemo port became infected, so they had to surgically remove it.

From then on, I started to get better. I think that had a lot to do with my faith. I know I had great doctors and that the Lord was on my side, but sometimes I feel lucky because I know things could have ended so differently. A month later, I came out of hospital – a week before exams started. I ended up having to rewrite four of my six modules, but eventually I passed everything.

Getting my degree at the end of that year proved to me that nothing had the power to define me. That was really important to me – I didn't want cancer to define me.

I learnt so much about myself and the people in my life – and the people who shouldn't be in my life, too. I was very grateful for my friends, family and for the people at university who stuck by me.

The Lord has given me a lot, and I am really thankful because sometimes I don't know how I even passed my final year while I was so sick. I think He realised that I really just needed it all to be over, and to become financially independent, too. During my four years of study, I had been very dependent on my mother, who sacrificed a lot and gave everything she had. I am fortunate to have her.

After my graduation ceremony, all I wanted to do was thank my mother and my boyfriend. I couldn't have asked for better in my life. While I was sick, I didn't have anything to contribute to anyone. I was just sick for months on end. If I had the time or energy to focus, it was on my studies, but my boyfriend never complained once. I have a great job now, so I have much for which to be thankful. To anyone going through a bad time, remember: You were given this life because you are strong enough to live it.

I am so grateful to those friends who remain in my life. I am grateful, too, that I've got to share my story. Although I won't let cancer define me, I have had to accept that it is a part of me. My story has made me who I am today.



MICHELLE

I decided that if I was going down, I was going to go down fighting.

By the time I received my cancer diagnosis in 2015, I was already in a very dark place. I'd lost my boyfriend to meningitis while I was pregnant, and I'd then given birth to my daughter, Chloe, who'd only lived for a day. Three days later, I lost my mom, too.

Despite the stress of losing my boyfriend, I'd had a perfect pregnancy and Chloe was a healthy baby, but when I went into labour, she became distressed in the womb. I lost a lot of blood, so I was unconscious during the delivery. When I awoke, she'd already passed away. My life became a giant emotional rollercoaster.

Two years later, I moved to another city to start a new life. I was offered a great job and I met someone who I ended up marrying. I felt like I was beginning to find my feet again.

Around that time, a mole on my back, which had been there for quite a while, began bothering me. It felt crusty and seemed to have a discharge. Because it was on my bra line, just out of sight, I put some cream on it, popped a plaster on top, and didn't think about it again.

One morning, about three months into my new job, I was getting dressed for work when my then-boyfriend said to me: 'That mole doesn't look healthy. We're going to the doctor today.' Despite my protests that I had to go to work, he insisted that I see the doctor that morning.

My GP said that he would cut it out and send it away for testing. Three days later, he phoned and told me he needed to see me. I knew that he'd never tell me bad news over the phone, so I prepared myself – or so I thought. I certainly wasn't prepared for the news: I had a stage 4 melanoma – one of the most aggressive cancers.

My doctor had already phoned around, and the oncologist who could see me first happened to be at a local, public hospital. I was concerned about going to a public hospital, but my doctor reassured me that the hospital had one of the best oncology units in the province.

At my appointment three weeks later, I was told that I had a six- to eight-month life expectancy. I don't think one is ever prepared to hear that one is going to die – particularly when they are feeling fine. It's just incomprehensible. I was in deep shock.

I was then tested to see where my lymphatic system drains. My mole is on my left-hand side, so it was expected that I would drain to my left. However, I was the one in 400 000 patients who drains into both sides. My doctor told me that I needed to rely on my inner positivity, but that we couldn't expect the best results. My operation was scheduled for three weeks later.

I was absolutely broken, and there were several mornings when my boyfriend found me crying on the bathroom floor. I couldn't bring myself to tell my daughter that I was going to die. I knew I had to give it the fight of my life.

I finally had the operation. They cut the lymph glands out from under both arms, as well as a huge section from my back. It was really uncomfortable afterwards, and sleeping was difficult for a

while, but it's just one of those little things that became part of the journey.

I then began radiation and chemotherapy treatment. The radiation, which was targeted, was particularly aggressive. During that time, I did considerable research on cancer and discovered that there is a link between sugar and cancer. So, I cut out sugar completely. I changed my diet and began banting. To this day, I won't touch sugar – not even natural fruit sugars.

Getting my head around everything was quite an extreme mental process: From being told that I was going to die, to believing that I was going to die, I had to finally get to a stage where I thought: 'No, I am *not* going to die. I am not yet ready to go. I have a daughter and I have my whole life ahead of me.'

I had already lost my previous boyfriend, Chloe, and my mom. During those times when the pain had felt too great, I had wanted to die, too. Eventually, though, I was able to say: 'No! My daughter has lost a sister and she has lost a grandmother. I'm not going to let her lose her mom, too.' I really wanted to live, and I wanted to see my daughter grow up.

I decided that if I was going down, I was going to go down fighting. I tried to carry on with my life and I continued working. I didn't lose all my hair, but it did thin out, so I cut it short. I stopped drinking completely, and I never once cheated on my banting diet. Living as normally as possible helped me a lot.

After all of the treatment, the time eventually came for me to have tests. I had been waiting in the queue for my results since 8am, and it was about 5.15pm when I finally saw my oncologist. He

looked miserable. I asked him: ‘Are you going to give me good news today?’

He said: ‘I hope so, I haven’t had a chance to look at your file. It’s been a hectic day.’

That day, my oncologist had been giving bad news to every patient he’d seen, but when he opened my file, he smiled and said: ‘Michelle, you’re a miracle. I can’t believe what I am seeing. I actually want to call for more tests ... it’s showing that you’re clear.’

I was in complete disbelief, too. I still get goosebumps thinking about it. I really am what they call a miracle patient. I attribute much of it to faith, and probably to my diet, too.

My journey from my diagnosis to a clean bill of health took about 16 months. I never question why I went through everything I did; I just keep going on faith and hope. I still go for tests every six months, and I will continue to do so for the rest of my life.

The oncology unit at the public hospital is amazing. They see thousands of patients daily, and yet whenever I have been for my check-ups, the staff have celebrated my positive results with me. They are phenomenal. I have never before been treated with such kindness and empathy. Oncology nurses truly are a different breed.

I’m in a really good space in my life now, and I’m so grateful to be able to share hope with others that there is light beyond the darker times. Positivity and faith are especially important to a cancer journey. If you are diagnosed with cancer, you have to fight. Be kind to your body. It goes through so much in chemo and radiation that you really need to give it the best possible shot at recuperating.

In the past, I had always been a positive, extroverted people-person, but my personal losses and my cancer really knocked me.

I became negative for a long time. I was angry at God, and I was angry with everyone else, too. I was particularly angry about losing people and having no control over it.

When I moved cities, I was angry and sad. Then, when I found out I had cancer, there was no anger. Instead, I was shocked and sad. I think that was my turning point: I had wasted so much time being angry and bitter. I know that it was part of my mourning process, but if I could change something in my life, it would be that.

Cancer was the turning point that led to me becoming me again. Although it was a hard fight, and it was worrying and stressful, I became Michelle again. I became the positive, glowing person who is once more ruled by her emotions and her heart.

My marriage did not survive, and we divorced after 18 months, but I am in a new relationship and I have never been happier. Cancer helped me to find myself again. That may sound crazy because cancer takes away so much life, but in many ways, it gave me a sense of purpose and it made me value life once more.



CRYSTAL

Yes, I had cancer, but cancer didn't have me. Right from the outset, I decided to do everything my way.

My cancer story is perhaps quite different from that of many others. I was diagnosed with stage 2, grade B breast cancer – the cancer had spread to my lymph nodes. When I was told my diagnosis, I didn't cry. In fact, I wasn't even sad. My doctor, however, who has known me for many years, was devastated. I simply said: 'No, I know I'm positive, you've told me. Now, let's do this; let's get it done.'

My doctor couldn't understand why I wasn't traumatised by the news, but I thought: 'I don't feel sick, I feel fine, so let's just get this over with.' Yes, I had cancer, but cancer didn't have me. Right from the outset, I decided to do everything my way. It was just something I had to get through. I knew that I wasn't going to die.

I was informed that my treatment would involve chemotherapy every three weeks, followed by a mastectomy, which I didn't want to have. Still, I'm now glad I had it, since cancer cells were later found in the breast tissue. Even though my doctors told me that I couldn't exercise, I ran every week, and I went to gym. I did things my own way – I just didn't tell my doctors!

I had my surgery at a public hospital because I didn't have medical aid. I was scheduled to have my mastectomy on the one day, and I told my doctors that I would be going home the next! The doctor said that we would see how I was, but the next morning,

I insisted on going home. After that, I stuck to what the doctors told me to do.

After each chemo treatment, I would feel ill for six days. In the morning, I would be sick, but during the day I would keep myself busy and the symptoms would go away. I would continue doing that until the six days were over. I kept telling myself that I would not allow the cancer to get to me. When the sickness kicked in, I would just tell myself that I was not sick. My motto was: 'There is nothing wrong with me.'

Yes, I would have off days when I felt quite sick, but when I lay down, it wouldn't even be half an hour before I was up again and telling myself: 'No, man. Go work!' Then I would keep myself busy on my laptop, working at my job as a personal assistant. Otherwise, I would clean the kitchen, watch TV, or do anything else to take my mind off the day. It really was a case of mind over matter.

I said to myself everyday: 'I have to get through this. I have to finish this, get it done and get it over with.' I didn't want the cancer in my body – it had to go away – and the sooner the better.

I fought hard to keep my mind busy at all times. I didn't want to get home from chemo and say: 'Oh, I'm so sick, I'm going to lie down for the day. Tomorrow, I'm going to lie down again, and the next day ...' I just couldn't do it. I refused to feel sorry for myself. When people told me that they were sorry, I would ask: 'Why? I'm not sick. Look at me, I'm not sick.'

Of course, I had my low moments, when the tears would come and I would feel sad, but I knew that they were cancer-related, so the feelings soon went away.

During cancer treatment, your body changes – your whole chemical make-up changes. I have always been fit, but I've probably lost about 80% of my fitness. That was really hard.

With cancer, health is always a concern, and you have to think of what you can and can't do. I have refused to do the 'green' diet. I love food, I love dessert – I love everything to do with food. I cook, I bake, and I love eating, too. If you can do those things in moderation, I don't see a problem.

I am very blessed that my partner stood by me. We had only been together for two years, but he was there through my entire journey. Yes, a part of my body is gone, but I can always get it back. That is up to me. Cancer is a journey on which you will find out who your friends are, on which family you can rely, and if you have a partner, if that person is actually for you. You will also find out your own strengths and weaknesses.

Cancer doesn't have to be a death sentence. That is important to realise. People hear the word 'cancer', and they think that they are dying. You don't have to die tomorrow. It's a thing that's in you, and you can usually get it out of you. You have to keep a positive mindset at all times. You need a good support system – friends and family. If you don't have that, there are places you can go to. Before that, though, you have to overcome your mind. It's about you and what you are going to do.

I can't say that cancer has changed me substantially. I have always been a positive person, but I've learnt to not worry about what other people are doing. I let them worry about themselves. I choose to always see the good in people and I don't bear grudges.

I have also learnt to do things immediately. Who knows what is going to happen tomorrow? Perhaps my outlook is a little more realistic now. Even though the doctors tell me I'm clear of cancer, there's always going to be a percentage of it that remains in me. I'm never totally free of it.

If you find out that you have cancer, please don't keep it to yourself. You have to tell somebody – just make sure that it is a positive person. Find someone you can speak to, and get your treatment as soon as possible. You have to take the first step. Your doctors can't do that for you, neither can your family. It is your diagnosis. Cancer is not your friend, and you have to decide how you are going to go about it.

Do the chemo. Yes, you are going to feel weak after that, most people do. When you are sick, speak to somebody or watch a movie. Do something: Get a new hobby, start baking or start cooking. Even if you want to eat too much, just eat.

Your mind is so powerful. What you think is what you put out there. If you have a positive mind, attitude and outlook, you can do anything. You can overcome anything.



REMOFILWE

What kept me going was the realisation that I'm not cancer. It's just part of my story. I'm also a creative, a partner and a sister. I add value in so many areas.

My journey with cancer started when I found a lump in my breast. I was only 25 years old at the time. I had initially been misdiagnosed and told that the lump was benign, but the pain persisted. Because I was in the public health system at that time, after the initial cancer finding, I was only scheduled for a mammogram later that year. I had been diagnosed in January, so I didn't want to wait eight months – I was sure that the cancer would have spread by then. So, I paid for a private ultrasound.

By that time, the cancer was in stage 2. My doctors decided to start with chemotherapy to reduce the mass and then do the surgery.

I did six rounds of chemotherapy. My chemo journey was more of an emotional one than a physical one. Yes, it took a physical toll, and it was very traumatising, but it was manageable. I was working at the time, so I would stay off work for about a week and then return until I had to go for the next round, but it was a real emotional rollercoaster.

Chemo was followed by surgery. The doctors had planned to remove one breast, but I didn't want to risk cancer in my other breast or having to have a second surgery, so I told the doctors that I wanted to remove them both, which they couldn't do all at once.

I had been going through so much: From the diagnosis and

those emotions, to not working and my hair loss, I didn't recognise myself. Then I had to remove a part of my body, which was hard. I had always hoped to breastfeed my kids one day, but then a social worker told me: 'If the cancer comes back, you can't be there for your kids.' That helped me decide that it was okay to remove both of my breasts.

It is so easy to assume that you have to do what your medical team tells you to do, but I chose to have the surgery when I could remove both breasts at the same time, and then follow that up with reconstructive surgery. I was quite young, and I felt like I needed my breasts back for my sense of femininity. It was something I wanted, but it wasn't easy.

I think it's really important for anyone who is diagnosed to not be afraid to get a second opinion. What you are facing is so huge. If you are unsure about anything, and you don't feel that what they suggest is something that you want to do, get another opinion. Unfortunately, money makes it impossible for some people to do that, but even stating your concerns to your doctor could help you.

I had the surgery and then did the radiation. The reconstruction followed 18 months later. I feel good, and I'm glad I did it. I had an amazing team who I trust with my life.

When I was done with treatment, I wasn't suddenly ready to go out with the girls again. I was very fatigued, and my immunity was still compromised. Since the surgery, I also suffer from lymphedema because they had to remove some lymph nodes, too, so my arms swell. I have to manage that, with the help of physio.

I am on the other side of it all now, but the after-effects don't just go away, and I don't think there is a timeframe to it. Fatigue

is very real, and it increases over time. I was also really impacted by what they call chemo brain. Workwise, it's a struggle; I battle to concentrate, and I forget even the smallest things. I need to put more effort into everything. It's a journey, and a process of embracing the person that I am now, while trying to find room for the person that I was before. It's not easy.

Generally, though, I am in a good space. The support of my friends, family and my husband really helped me. I think that my mindset and positive attitude also helped me through, as I wouldn't allow myself to wallow in those dark places. Importantly, I kept my faith, too. Every day I thought: 'If this is the end, then I want to live it the best I can. And if I do make it through, then I want to live even more than before.'

If you are diagnosed with cancer, become informed. That takes away the anxiety. If you have any concerns, speak to your team directly. If a worry or question comes up, write it down. In fact, write down everything. It's okay to ask questions. Know all of your options, so that you are prepared for what's coming.

Your diagnosis is just a part of your story, it's not you. There are so many of us who have overcome. Join a support group – those people will understand you the most. If you search for me online, you will find that I have documented everything, from chemo to losing my hair. You'll have at least one person cheering you on.

Remember: You are beautiful, and worth every effort that people make for you. Sometimes, you may feel like a burden to others, but allow yourself to be taken care of, and know that people love you. Your medical team are going to try their best to save you, but that starts with you being positive and holding on to hope.

What kept me going was the realisation that I'm not cancer. It's just part of my story. I'm also a creative, a partner and a sister. I add value in so many areas. Cancer has definitely transformed me, but it wasn't a choice. It forced me to grow. I learnt how resilient I really am, and I learnt to be more vulnerable with the people around me. I also had to redefine my beauty and my purpose. It made me want to be more present in my life.

In a way, cancer has given me the gift of my story of overcoming. I am living testimony to what we are able to do. Being able to reach people with my story and to give hope is the most fulfilling gift of all.



MELANY

Everything that has happened in my life has made me a fighter. I'm not going to let cancer, or any other situation, get the better of me.

It was December, and my mother-in-law had just passed away from cancer. It had been a difficult time for our family. We'd been running up and down to the hospital, it was exam time for the kids, and life was generally so hectic that we had been tending to everyone else's needs but our own.

The day after my mother-in-law's funeral, I took a breath and thought: 'Now I can relax a bit.' I got out of the shower that evening and realised that it had been months since I had checked my boobs. Then I felt a little lump in the left breast. I wasn't too worried, since I knew that I had dense breast tissue.

In mid-January, I went for a mammogram. The radiographer didn't pick up the lump on the sonar, but she did note a swollen gland under my armpit. The doctor she consulted said that because my breast tissue was dense, he believed that the gland under my arm was a 'reactive gland'. He advised me to return in six months for another check-up. The next day, I went to my GP, who felt the lump, too. He wasn't satisfied with what I'd been told and noted that the nipple on the same breast was pulling slightly to the left. He referred me to a general specialist.

I will never forget the specialist's words: 'These things have a way of hiding in your body. Let's take out some tissue around the lump and send it away.' I went to my gynaecologist for a second opinion, but he advised me to have the lump removed and tested.

Work kept me busy for the rest of January, so I was only able to have the lump removed in early February. I went back to the doctor for the results in mid-February. There was a 1cm-sized tumour in the lump.

My husband was with me when we walked out of the hospital that day. He asked me: 'What are we going to do now?' It hadn't even been three months since he'd lost his mother. I made a decision there and then that I was not going to let the cancer take over our lives. Since that day, I have stuck to that rule – I will not let cancer take over.

Many blood tests and scans followed. A biopsy of the swollen gland revealed cancer cells, and an MRI showed another big chunk of cancer inside the same breast. In March, I had my first mastectomy. The results showed that I had triple-positive, oestrogen-related cancer. The oncologist told me that was good news, because oestrogen-related cancer is highly treatable.

Four weeks later, I started chemotherapy, which happened every three weeks. I had a total of six sessions over about three months: Three Red Devils and three 'white chemos'.

Chemotherapy wasn't easy and the side effects were awful: I had nausea, wasn't able to eat properly, and I lost weight. The Red Devil made me feel as if I was inside a dark tunnel. Three or four days after treatment I would feel surrounded by light again. With the dark tunnel gone, I was able to live life and go to work for the next two weeks, until the next treatment. The three white chemos caused me terrible joint pain, and there were days when I couldn't walk. Then, in September, I had 25 sessions of radiation. That went okay.

After the operation, I was off work for about four weeks, but I worked every day throughout the radiation. In a way, being busy at work kept me going. I've heard of people who just sit at home through their treatment, but that wouldn't have worked for me. That year, I was also extremely involved with the parents' association at my children's school, and I managed to finish my Criminology degree! I had been diagnosed during my last year of studies, so staying busy helped a lot.

In the October, I started taking a hormone tablet. I take it every day to block the oestrogen in my body, and I get an injection every three months to block the oestrogen levels in my ovaries. At age 42, I was pushed into menopause. I will still be on the hormone tablet for another few years, and I might get my ovaries removed, too.

A year later, I had another mastectomy, followed by a double reconstruction. The time between the first mastectomy and the second, with the double reconstruction, was 18 months. My breasts are still recovering, and the scars are quite hectic, but I'm looking after myself.

This journey is not easy, but it comes down to attitude – you have to stay positive. You can't go sit in a dark corner; that's just not going to work. Yes, I've had bad days – and I still have bad days. I allow myself to have them because I know the next ones will be better. Then there are those days when I can't actually believe what I have been through, and I wonder why I am going through it. This is never going to be over for me. I'm going to battle cancer forever. If they tell me that I can come off the medication, what will happen? Chances are that it will come back.

I love to give, and I'm not good at receiving, but this journey has taught me that sometimes I need to accept the support and be a little bit selfish, too. I've realised that sometimes it's better to let people see that you're not having a good day so that they can support you. I told everybody at work what I was going through, and they have been an incredible support. They have seen that although I'm a manager, I'm also a human being with feelings. A wonderful husband and children, as well as amazing friends and family, helped carry me through a difficult time.

I am a Christian, and I could not have travelled this road without God. If I look back at everything that has happened, I'm reminded that He's always there and He never leaves me. I know that He has chosen me for something, and miracles have happened. Many days I sit and ask: 'Lord, I know you have chosen me, but I don't know what exactly for.' Maybe He has specifically chosen me to go on this journey to show other women that they can do it, too.

If you're diagnosed with cancer, it's important to remember that you can't go through it alone – you need a support system. Take it day by day and don't think too far into the future. If you're not happy with the treatment you're getting from your doctor, you have the right to go somewhere else. Get a first, second and third opinion, if needed. Although it's difficult sometimes, a healthy lifestyle and exercise are also a must. You'll feel so much better if you look after yourself.

I was in the police service for 10 years, and I'm still in the same line of work – security. Being a cop in a man's world makes you a tough cookie. If I make a decision, I stick to it. This is not just

applicable to the cancer, but to life in general. I believe you have to fight, and you have to be strong, but cry if you need to cry.

I've had cancer and I've learnt a lot, and I am now leaving it behind me. I determine my own life. Many things in life aren't easy, but I've had a choice: Fight or flight. I have gone through a lot of turmoil in my life, and I'm not going to let cancer, or any other situation, get the better of me.



C A R L A

When I first got my diagnosis, it seemed like such a long journey ahead. I wish I had known that I could come out stronger at the end of the tunnel. I would have stressed less!

I didn't think it could happen to me. Many people are scared of the big 'C' word, but I really hadn't even thought about it.

My first reaction to my diagnosis was: 'No, this just can't be. I am super-healthy, I exercise and I'm in top shape. Why would this happen?' I literally felt a knot in my left breast, and so many emotions flowed through me.

My doctor made the decision that I should undergo a double mastectomy and a double reconstruction afterwards. That was to avoid the possibility of the cancer returning in the other breast. The whole process took quite a while – about three-and-a-half weeks – and then I was in hospital for a week, followed by about five to six weeks of recovery.

I had lost a lot of weight and my breasts were quite saggy because of all the fat that I had lost in them. After the first operation, I immediately had perky boobs, which was great! They inserted my prosthesis underneath the muscle. That way, they will stay perky for longer. I had been quite shy about my breasts before, but all of a sudden, they were way better.

I was then told that I was going to have to have chemo. It took me a good night's rest to realise that I was probably going to get through it, but at that stage, I couldn't stop crying. I just cried like a baby. It was hard to realise that I was going to lose my hair. I didn't

want people to look at me and think that I was sick. I was only 24 years old!

I had done the gene test, in which they had sent my cancer cells to Amsterdam to check if my type of cancer would respond to chemo – apparently about 60% of people are unresponsive to it. When we discovered that my cancer would respond, I instead began to view chemo as an investment in my health. It was an additional precaution, and I knew that it would give me a second chance at life.

I started chemo and had a cycle of six Red Devils once every three weeks. I did it on a Friday so that I could recover over the weekend and then go back to work, sometimes on the Monday or Tuesday. I would then be back in the gym on the Tuesday morning. I even did a 109km cycle race while I was having chemo! I decided that I just had to carry on as normal.

When I first walked into the chemo room, I was by far the youngest person there. I had always imagined a chemo room as being dark and depressing, but that really wasn't the case. I used to say that the nursing sisters there were like angels. They were so gentle and caring and really looked after us. Even though I felt bad, I never really got that sick.

To avoid hair loss, I tried not to wash my hair often. One Sunday, a friend and I had just returned from a hike, so obviously, my hair needed a wash. That day, my hair started to fall out, so a friend shaved it off for me. The following week, in the gym, my personal trainer came up to me and said that I looked like a real tennis player, a superstar! He obviously knew what I was going through, but he

didn't have to say that. I thought: 'Thanks. I'm going to take that.' Then another girl I knew walked up to me in the locker room and asked if I was okay. After that, I started wearing a wig.

I had to have another fat graft, in which they injected fat into my breasts again. They had to do that three times because I was so tiny when they did the operation. When I came out of hospital, I weighed about 48kg, and they couldn't get enough fat to put underneath the skin.

I then had another reconstruction. They also did a nipple and areola reconstruction. For the first time in eight years, my boobs look normal and natural. This is much better, and I am super-happy.

I think that for me, the most important thing that I did throughout my treatment was continuing to exercise. I was told that cancer cells don't really like an oxygen-rich environment. I followed a nutrition plan and I cut out all alcohol, dairy, sugar and carbs, which was difficult, but I managed it for about 18 weeks.

Because my type of cancer is oestrogen-related, I was on hormone tablets for five years after chemo. I also had an injection once a month. That was possibly the worst. It was fantastic to not get my period for five years, but being in menopause and getting night sweats was just horrible. In fact, that was worse than the chemo! So, now, when we are ready to start a family, we can look at our options. I have gone to the doctor and everything looks good and healthy. In two years' time, I can say that I have been free from cancer for 10 years.

I now try to avoid negativity in my life. This is going to sound weird, but I think that God gave me my cancer. It was never a fear

of mine. I would sometimes get emotional when I thought about what I had survived, but I knew that I wasn't going to die from cancer. In my case, it was something that they could cut out. As soon as they had checked my glands and told me that it hadn't spread, I knew that I was going to be fine and that the doctors were going to sort it out.

My friends, family and now-husband created a really good support structure. I think that if you don't have that, you're going to struggle. It's really important, especially when you are so young, to try to carry on as usual. Don't change the type of exercise you do, and don't 'feel' that you are sick. It was not my fault that this happened to me. It just happened. Yes, my body worked hard to recover from the operation, and the chemo is really hard, but I am not sick.

Every year, I need to see the oncologist, and once a year I see my doctor, too. But cancer has brought me many things. Healthwise, I now look at what I need to eat and what I should avoid. It has also taught me not to worry as much. I'm someone who has always stressed easily, but I now know that stress is one of the biggest contributors to chronic disease, so I now stress less and am more at peace. I try not to be so hard on myself, and I don't always need to follow a plan.

I also appreciate the small things in life. Now, after spending time with, or talking to someone, I think: How did I leave them? How did I make them feel? I have learnt to appreciate life and the people around me, because literally anything can happen at any time. Luckily, I am still here.

Don't take people and things for granted – and explore more. My husband and I began to travel a lot. We've learnt that we don't need many 'things'. We don't necessarily have the best or newest of everything, but you can't take that with you one day. You can, however, take memories and experiences. That has been a lesson for me. One day, at the end, I want to be able to tell a story. What type of story are you going to tell about the things that you have? Experience and live your life! Tell your story! I would rather spend my money on experiences.

I wish I had known from the beginning that cancer was not going to be that bad. When I first got my diagnosis, it seemed like such a long journey ahead. I wish I had known that I could come out stronger at the end of the tunnel. I would have stressed less! At the end of the day, you just need to have faith, be strong, carry on and avoid the negativity.



PILISWA

As African people, we need to educate ourselves. We need to understand that cancer is everyone's disease. The more we open our minds and hearts to what is happening, the more we will conquer cancer.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was nearly 24 years old. I had never before done a self-examination, but something in my right breast felt weird.

I am a nurse, so I asked a breast surgeon friend to check it out. She told me that she couldn't make a determination without a proper specimen. The results showed cancerous cells, and it was growing. A mammogram and further tests followed, and suddenly, just before my 24th birthday, I found myself sitting with a cancer diagnosis.

I was scheduled for a full mastectomy to remove the breast, followed by chemotherapy and then radiation. Because I was so young, my situation was unpredictable, and I was told that I had to take Tamoxifen tablets for five years.

By the time I turned 25, I had one breast, and an expander in the other side. But then my body had a reaction to the expander, and I had to have emergency surgery to remove it. I ended up only taking the Tamoxifen for two years because it made me so sick. Throughout my treatment, everyone had made decisions on my behalf. The Tamoxifen was making me feel like a tired old woman, and I needed control over my own body again. Of course, my doctors thought I was mad. Five years later, they were still worried that the cancer would return, but it's been eight years, and nothing has happened yet.

Perhaps the most difficult part of my whole cancer journey was having to tell my parents my diagnosis – and I had to do it over the phone. My mom said: ‘Nah, there is no such thing. You can’t be diagnosed with breast cancer.’ She thought that I was making decisions too quickly, and she wanted me to just wait and see what happened. I said to her: ‘I have got my own medical aid. You have made me into a big woman, so I am taking my own initiative now.’ She always questioned whether I should have waited a bit, but why wait when you don’t know what the future will bring?

As an African woman, certain things, like cancer, are taboo and only for certain races and cultures. The worst part was that I was so young – and things like that didn’t happen to young people – or to black people, apparently.

I always told myself that there was a cure and that I was going to survive. It was just a speedbump that I had to get over. I knew that if the doctors were preparing me for the fight, then God was preparing me, too. I did a lot of journal writing during that time. I look at that girl I was back then and think: ‘Wow, you were so strong.’

When I went back to the gym, a friend told me that I should consider myself lucky because no one could see that I had one breast – it was not like I had one arm or one leg! I was blessed to have friends who could laugh about it with me, too.

After the expander burst, I made a decision to live with one breast. That decision helped me to grow as a person. I came to a place where, when I looked in the mirror, I was happy with what I saw. I never felt that having one breast was a sin or a curse. Of course, it was difficult sometimes. I had to be careful about what I

wore, how it would look and whether it was comfortable. Prosthetic breasts can become lopsided or pop out. I remained without a breast for four years, until I felt ready to have a reconstruction.

During that journey, I wrote letters to 24-year-old Piliswa. When I look back at certain letters that I wrote to myself, I am so proud of her – of myself. After chemo, young Piliswa would take a taxi back to where she was staying, and then rest. Her friends would cook for her, but sometimes she wouldn't feel like eating. She maintained through it all. She got up each day and went to work. She lost her hair and she gained weight. Sometimes, she lost weight. Still, she was glowing and happy. Yes, there were days when I felt like doing nothing and turned off my phone – I call those duvet days. On other days, I just wrote those letters to myself and told young Piliswa: 'Today was just one of those days. You will make it through.'

My parents thought I was going to die. I wasn't going to let that happen. I still need to have kids and set up a life for myself. I have new breasts now, and I will never hold my mother's reactions against her. As a black woman who had never been exposed to cancer, it was hard for her to understand.

I know that the more I share my story, the more I will be able to touch other African ladies in particular. I have had breast cancer. So what? The more we, in African communities, stop worrying about the stigmas around cancer, and about what people say, the better. As African people, we need to educate ourselves. We need to understand that cancer is everyone's disease. The more we open our minds and hearts to what is happening, the more we will conquer cancer.

I have survived it. Some people celebrate their birthdays, but I go big on my chemo days and my remission days, because I survived another year. I wish more black communities could support their family members with cancer. Not all survivors will cope the way I did. We all have different journeys.

To anyone who has just received their diagnosis, remember: You have taken your first step, now just keep going. Take each day as it comes; each one will be different. Go for all of your chemo sessions and try to stay positive. Where you can, find the humour in your situation.

You need to believe in yourself, and you need to drive yourself through your journey. There is so much still ahead of you, so start making goals. Not every day is going to be beautiful, but there are so many people out there who will support you, too.



LEIGH-ANN

Going through cancer is scary,
but it needs to be. There is a story
behind it, and there are lessons to
be learnt along the way.

My cancer saved my life and changed me for the better. It has forced me to grow, and through my journey, so many doors have opened.

Coming from a conservative Afrikaans family, I had gone through life believing that I was a ‘coper’. When something bad happened, I always just went on. Getting sick with cancer came as a real shock to my system.

I was pregnant when I realised that I had a swollen gland, but I didn’t think much of it. A blood test came back normal, but the swelling didn’t go away. By the time I realised that there was something very wrong, I had a three-year-old and a five-month-old baby.

In the course of one week, I was retrenched from my job and received my cancer diagnosis. I thought: ‘Universe, what’s going on here?’ Looking back now, I realise that I was fortunate that we had financial policies in place. Everything just aligned to support me.

I had been so unhappy at work, but as a parent, I obviously needed the money. Then the Universe said: ‘Well, you’ll get money, but you will get cancer, too.’ And that’s exactly what happened: I got stage 4 cancer.

I went for conventional treatment – but I felt forced into it by family pressure – and it really wasn’t a pleasant experience.

I underwent treatment for two days a month, for six months. It

was hard. My daughter was three at the time, so she would stay at home with my husband and I would take my five-month-old to my mom's house for a week. Obviously, I didn't feel well during that time, but then I would go home, and life would carry on as normal.

During those six months, everything was planned, and my life had a schedule: I knew on which days I had treatment, which days I would feel bad, and when I would be back home again, feeling pretty much fine ... before everything started all over again.

When I finished treatment, I went for my scan. The cancer had gone, and everything was fine. I found myself feeling lost; I no longer knew who I was. I thought: 'What now?'

I had been quite negative up until that point, and then I felt as though I was falling into an even deeper hole. Even though I was healthy, and everything was physically fine, mentally and emotionally, I wasn't okay. So, I started going for energy work, life activation and crystal healing. I also visited a natural clinic three hours from where I live.

One of their recommendations was treatment using a rife machine, which kills cancer cells with their own frequency.

I started doing some research and talked to an engineer who was studying rife machines. He said that he actually had a different machine that was even better, so I met up with him. I still had some money left from my pay-out, so I bought the machine and went for the training. A whole different world opened up to me, and things just started happening!

When you have cancer, it's easy to become overwhelmed with the information thrown at you, and you just need to absorb it as best as you can. I would always look at the titles of the people

addressing me – like ‘doctor’, ‘professor’ and ‘dietician’ – and think that there was no way that I could ever become like them. Now, through this machine, I am educating people about their health. It is a diagnostic machine that picks up low-energy organs. I can see, for instance, if your thyroid has low energy. That means that it is probably inflamed or stressed.

Our bodies are meant to heal themselves. Through all of my negativity, anger and unhappiness, I had basically made myself sick. I changed everything in my life – from the pots and pans I used, to my toothpaste, deodorant and non-chemical things – but the biggest of them all was my mindset.

I realised that I was forever moaning. I was always negative and so unhappy with my circumstances. In reality, I was the problem, and I was so far gone that I didn’t even realise it. I never thought that I was unhappy, but I now realise that I was completely and utterly disgusted with everybody and everything.

After training on the machine, I started my business, and we now own a nursery, too.

I had always wanted to have a medicinal aspect to my business, so now I can sell microgreens, herbs and suchlike through the nursery.

Personally, I will never do chemo again. I don’t want a quick fix that’s not going to last forever. I believe that cancer is more of a mental-emotional issue.

Natural treatment has had a major impact on not only how I live my daily life, but on my family and those I try to help, too.

There is so much out there that people don’t know. Most people think that tumours are bad – because that is what doctors have told

us – but they are actually our immune system's way of saying that there is something wrong.

I believe that tumours can disappear naturally.

Before the cancer, I had been in sales and marketing, but I was reactive and didn't like authority. I was very uptight and strong-willed, and I could never put myself in anyone else's shoes, either. Looking back, I think I was a bit of a bitch! I was obviously very self-centered, and I needed to be grounded.

In a way, I needed something bad to happen to me to snap me out of it. Getting sick was that thing. The whole journey softened and changed me. I am now far more soft-spoken; I listen instead of talk; and I have also realised that I would rather have no job than a job that I don't really want. I now work mainly from home, and I am more in my children's lives.

I had to get sick to realise that working in a job for someone else wasn't my purpose. Sales and marketing weren't really my thing, either. I am a server and I love to help people. I have definitely become more sympathetic and empathetic. I'm also a better friend, better wife and a better sister. I'm a better everything!

During the tough times, I had to learn to surrender. I realised that although I was doing everything I could to help myself, I just had to surrender and let go. I had always been quite controlling, so that was hard. Surrender in turn led to an acceptance of what was happening: I had to go with the flow. I also had amazing support from my family and friends.

I had never really been a crier. My husband and I had a stillborn child in 2013. My doctor gave me pills to take for six months, and told me that time would heal. I took the pills and eventually

went back to work. It is hard to be okay when all of the trauma is sitting in your body – all of that hurt and grief. The cancer forced me to deal with my emotions and to become okay with crying. In Afrikaans society, crying is perceived as a sign of weakness: We cry, and we move on; life happens, and people die.

I know that I still have much growth ahead of me, and I haven't mastered anything! But I am content, and I am doing what I love. Now I force myself to be present in the moment and to focus on what is going on now.

Going through cancer is scary, but it needs to be. There is a story behind it, and there are lessons to be learnt along the way.



LIEZEL

Cancer helped me realise that
it's okay to take time for myself.
When I started saying: 'No,' it
felt really good.

When I found a lump in my breast, I went for a scan and was told that it was just a cyst and nothing to worry about. But a couple of months later, it was still there, and it felt like it had changed shape.

I went for a biopsy on the lump, and abnormal cells were detected. The lump had to be removed. A week after my lumpectomy, I went to see my surgeon. I hadn't expected the news: They had found cancer cells. Beyond that, I never heard a word. Shock took over.

Luckily, the cancer was in stage 1, although the type of cancer was grade 3 – quick-growing and invasive. From thereon out, everything happened so fast, and I faced a whirlwind of specialist appointments. Still, I tackled everything as I would any other project – I hit the ground running and onboarded all of the information I could.

A few weeks later, I began chemotherapy. I think the scariest part of the whole experience was the anticipation and fear that I felt each week, not knowing how my body was going to react to the treatment on that day. I finished chemotherapy, and a month afterwards, I had a double mastectomy. Based on my risk factors, I decided to have both breasts removed. I didn't want to have to face cancer again. For me, it was the right route to go, and I don't regret it.

I found the surgery more challenging than the chemo. Chemo was weekly, and I didn't feel great afterwards, but it was manageable. I like to think that I'm mentally strong, and I make a point of thinking positively and seeing what I can take from my journey, but the surgery was tough. It was a physical assault on my body. The expanders were inserted under my muscles. Each week, when they stretched the muscles, the pain would last for at least two days at a time. That was far more challenging to push through, and I just went into survival mode.

It took about two months to stretch my muscles, before they replaced the implants. That was followed by an adjustment surgery. I will be doing one more surgery to build a new nipple on one side, but that will be much later on. It has been a long journey and the reconstruction took much longer than I anticipated. It is not a quick fix. I still have to have ongoing injections and take medication, but I am so grateful to be on the other side of the mountain.

The biggest lesson I had to learn was to let go. I am so used to being on top of everything, but I've had to realise that there are instances in life in which I don't have that control. I have to let go of my need to try to control everything, and to ride the wave and trust that everything will be fine. Part of that process means letting go of fixed milestones or deadlines.

Cancer also forced me to slow down. I was always rushing about at 100 miles an hour, taking on too many tasks and saying: 'Yes,' to everything. I was a people-pleaser. Cancer helped me realise that it's okay to take time for myself. When I started saying: 'No,' it felt really good. I had been so used to putting everybody else first, but learning to prioritise myself was a good lesson.

I try to start each day with meditation and quietness, while staying in the present. Having cancer can be so overwhelming and it is often all you think about. I realised how important it was to put everything aside, to just be in the moment, and to tap into myself.

I also decided that I was not going to let cancer define who I was. It is not who I am – it is just something that happened to me, and I had to go through it and experience it. I choose to be positive and to visualise positive outcomes, while being grateful for the little things I do have. I have never before felt more grateful for eyebrows and eyelashes! We tend to take a functioning, healthy body for granted, but I no longer do that.

If you find yourself facing a cancer diagnosis, let go of the control. You are going to have to do things that you don't want to do, and you have to roll with it.

You are way stronger than you ever thought possible, so take care of your body and give it the proper nutrients through the journey, and look after your mind. Choose to be positive, and choose hope. In the midst of everything, it's so easy to choose despair, so actively work at your choices. It is okay to have off-days – in fact, they are necessary – but you will come out the other side stronger, healthier and a better person.



LIZELLE

You've got to find an inner
strength that makes you wake up
and say: 'I'm going to live today,
and I'm not going to lie around
and feel sorry for myself.'

I first contracted cancer at 16 years old, when I was diagnosed with lymphoma. After receiving treatment for that, I went into remission for 17 years. During that time, I managed to naturally conceive my son, which was unexpected. He is my greatest blessing and the reason that I fight today.

At age 33, when my son was only 14 months old, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I underwent all of the usual breast cancer treatments, including a mastectomy and immediate reconstruction, which left me with a really ugly breast and scars. During that time, I decided that once I felt comfortable in my own skin again, I would share my story and inspire other women to persevere through similar circumstances. At my age, I was still trying to juggle a career; be a mommy and a wife; look good for my husband and fight for my life.

While going through breast cancer treatment, I made a conscious decision to try everything possible to save my hair. As a teenager, I had lost my hair during chemotherapy, but the second time around, I had a little boy, and I didn't want him to see his mommy sick, without hair. I used something called a cold cap, and I managed to save most of my hair.

I'm in stage 4 metastatic breast cancer, so I will never be cured or in remission, but I refuse to allow that to dictate my life. I choose to live my life to the fullest.

In 2016, I entered Mrs South Africa, and I proudly wore a swimsuit that showed off my big scar. One of the judges came to me afterwards and said that he was touched by the fact that I hadn't hidden my scar from anyone. I've adopted the hashtag #thisisme. This is who I am, complete with my nasty scars and thinning hair. I want to motivate women, particularly cancer patients, to love themselves as they are – complete with ugly scars, cellulite, or whatever else stops them from feeling pretty.

To carry on with life and all of its responsibilities, you've got to find an inner strength that makes you wake up and say: 'I'm going to live today, and I'm not going to lie around and feel sorry for myself.' Obviously, there are bad days, but I appreciate the little things: A sunset, or my boy cuddling me in bed. I try to inspire others to feel the same way on their journey.

I live life by the mantra: 'Attitude is the difference between an ordeal or an adventure.' I believe that if you have the right attitude, you can conquer anything. You have the power to turn something negative into a positive. I try to see the positive in everything I do.

Cancer has so many negative associations, but when I look at the friends who've crossed my path, I know that I would never have met them if it weren't for cancer. I've also done radio and TV shows, which brought so much joy into my life. Then there are the simple things, too. I'm part of an organisation that does outreach to hospitals. It's sad to meet sick kids, but it's so rewarding to see their smiles when we give them a hug and bring some light into their lives.

My cancer journey has definitely been more positive than negative. When you're sitting in that chemo room, scared out of your

mind, you need to find something positive to focus on. Plan a long-term goal. When I was going through chemo, my little boy was about to turn two. I would plan his birthday party because I was adamant that I was going to be there for his second birthday – and I was going to give him the best party possible.

I'm due to go for scans again soon, and yes, the anxiety is real, but I also know that I have no control over the results. I just need to live through today and do what I can to make it the best day possible. It's all about focusing on goals and finding that positive to look forward to. That's how I deal with it.

One of the hardest things I faced on this journey was losing my breast. As a result of the lymphoma when I was 16, I never really developed breasts. I was flat-chested, which was a big deal for me, so at 27, I invested in myself and got breast implants. I was so proud of my beautiful boobs, and it made a big difference to how I felt. When I discovered that I had to have surgery, it really affected me.

Still, my scariest moment was being told that the cancer had spread to my liver and that I'd moved from stage 2 to stage 4 cancer. I had to come to terms with the fact that my condition is terminal and that I don't know for how long I'll be around.

I looked at my son – he was five at the time – and thought: 'I want to be here for his first day of Grade One, and I want to be here when he plays his first sports match.' I've been told that I have five years to live. No, no one can determine that for me, but the idea of missing out on things, and my boy growing up without a mommy, scares me the most.

My son will always be the reason that I continue to fight. I have to be around as long as possible for him. I must be able to leave

memories for him for the rest of his life. It's particularly important to me that I leave a legacy for him. I want to instil in him my values of kindness and looking after others, and of being gentle. I want him to look at me and think: 'Wow, I want to be like Mom one day.' It's not always easy, though.

Even going to the grocery store is now a blessing rather than a chore. How many more grocery store trips will I have? People can be so negative, but we have so much for which to be grateful. We need to appreciate our lives.

I think cancer has changed me for the better. I now go out and really try to grab every opportunity that comes my way. Before cancer, I was perhaps more reserved, and I worried about people judging me. Through the organisation I belong to, I now get to dance on stage, sing and have fun, while showing people that we can celebrate life even though we live with cancer. I don't think the old Lizelle would have done that. This new Lizelle doesn't give a damn! You either like me or you don't. I'm crazy and I'm fun, and I will drag you into my party.

There can be so much darkness in my world, but I don't want to be dark; I want it to be as free and as happy as possible. I've had two liver resections, and I've been in ICU with an epidural for a week. When I go into the tunnel for my scans, I know they're going to struggle to find a vein to insert the drip, and I know it's going to be an hour in that machine. I need to have happy moments that allow me to free my mind from what's physically happening to me. Every time I do something I love, I fill my bucket, because at a later stage, I'm going to feed from that bucket again during the bad times. That's my coping mechanism, and it works for me.

Many people look at me and say that I shouldn't be drinking alcohol. No, I shouldn't, but so what? I enjoy a gin every now and then, and I enjoy a glass of wine. They tell me that I shouldn't be putting my life at risk by getting on the back of a motorcycle, either, but it brings me pleasure. That's what I enjoy doing.

When it comes to my story, I don't mince my words and I don't hide the ugliness – because there is ugliness. After I've spoken at events, people have approached me and said that thanks to my story, they had lumps checked out, which turned out to be cancerous. If it hadn't been for that, they might not be around now. So, there is a reason why I'm on this journey. It's bigger than me and it's affecting other people's lives. That motivates me to keep pushing, sharing, fighting and doing what I'm doing. Cancer is merely a speedbump on the road at the moment. There will be better days to come.



S A M A N T H A

The key is to never stop praying
and to never stop reaching out.
Fight, and never stop. Along the
way, you will find the real you.

My cancer journey started when I had a lot of backache and pain, and my legs wouldn't work properly, so my GP sent me for x-rays. I was told that I had arthritis in my spine, and I began treatment.

It seemed like every month after that, I had to be rushed to hospital for the pain. At the time, my three boys were aged 10, three, and the youngest wasn't even one. By the following January, I was in so much pain that my mom rushed me to the emergency room. After an MRI, I was told that I needed to get off my legs immediately. I had cancer, it had spread to my spine and the bone was collapsing.

My oncologist said that the breast was likely the primary source of the cancer, but it had spread to my liver, lungs, spine and part of my bones. It was stage 4. I told her that my children were very young, and I asked her: 'Am I going to die?' She told me that the doctors couldn't take the cancer away – it had spread too far – but that they would do what they could to help me see my kids grow into young men.

So, here I am. Two years later, I still have stage 4 cancer. The lesions on my lungs are clear; it is still in my back; it is growing on my arms, and it has spread to my brain. I had radiation to my hips and back, and now my brain. I have a lot of pain on my right side, but I don't want any more radiation right now. I would rather take

morphine and then, when I really can't take the pain, I will go back again.

I first had radiation for my back, so I could keep my ability to walk. Then I had five cycles of chemotherapy, including the Red Devil. After that, I went on hormone treatment, and now I am on chemotherapy again. It doesn't seem that the chemo works with my body. I have had to stop it three times because my platelets and other levels keep dropping.

Because of my children, I continue to fight hard. There are days when I tell myself: 'Just give up.' Sometimes it feels like nothing is working, but then I think of my kids. I don't want them to see me on a sick bed. I have been married for seven years and my husband has taken it hard. Still, he keeps himself as strong as Superman. He handles everything: He cooks, cleans and watches the kids. My mom and my sister also help with the children. Many of my friends are supportive, too.

Since my diagnosis, many people have reached out to me. They say that I am so strong and that I inspire them. I have been documenting my journey online, but haven't posted for a month or two, as I've been really struggling emotionally. Telling your story online can become very overwhelming because people comment.

I still have those moments when I ask God: 'Why me?' I am a firm believer, and my faith has always been my everything, but since cancer, it's been difficult. I am now one of those people who everyone else prays for.

My hair has now fallen out for the second time. The first time was during chemo, and now it has happened during radiation to my

brain. Apparently, it is not going to grow back this time. I asked my husband the other day how he feels about my baldness. He told me that he forgets I'm bald. He doesn't see it anymore. That made me feel better. When I posted a picture online of myself bald, I got a lot of likes. I don't know if it was for being bald, or if it was just for having the courage to post that. It doesn't really matter either way, I feel good when I post something.

One positive that has come out of my whole journey is that my family was never very close, but since my cancer, that has changed. I have learnt that life is short. My sister and I didn't have a great relationship before, but I have realised how much I love that woman. She helps with my kids, too. No one asks her to do that, she chooses to help out.

If you have been diagnosed with cancer and you need to cry, then cry. If you feel you can't cope, see a therapist. That's what I did. But whatever you do, put God in it. If you are not a believer, then put into it what you do believe in ... The key is to never stop praying and to never stop reaching out. Fight, and never stop. Along the way, you will find the real you. That is the journey. Your journey is not to say: 'I have cancer, I can't do this anymore.' Your journey is happening so that when you come out of it, you are so very strong.

It's very important for me to surround myself with positivity, and I want to live my life the way I choose. So, I eat that piece of cake. They say I shouldn't have sugar, but no! Anything can happen in the future, and then I didn't have my cake. I say: 'Enjoy it!'



JANA

I wouldn't say that cancer changed me that much. I am still a little crazy, and I like to be creative. I have not suddenly become a 'seize-the-moment-because-I-nearly-died' type of person.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was 27. I felt a lump – much like a cherry tomato, or a marble. I immediately knew that it shouldn't be there. I didn't panic, but I did tell my mom, because we have a family history of breast cancer.

After two biopsies and genetic testing, it was confirmed that I had cancer – but it was hormonal, rather than genetic. The doctors suggested a double mastectomy with a reconstruction after the operation. I was also informed that I would have to undergo chemotherapy followed by radiation. It was all quite overwhelming.

As a teacher, I didn't stop working during my treatment, so I never immersed myself totally in the cancer experience – it just became a part of my life. I am a very realistic person – annoyingly so. During treatment, when I started losing my hair, my husband shaved the rest of it off. We shaved all sorts of shapes into my hair and took a video of it. I thought it was cool, but my mom asked: 'Are you insane? Why aren't you crying?' I think I had decided to make my experience as pleasant as possible, and for those around me, too. Luckily, the nature of my personality allowed me to make that choice.

I dealt with my treatment in the only way that I could, and in the way that I needed to deal with it. I wanted to make sure that other people saw that I was okay – because I was okay. After my

diagnosis, I started a social media account to document my breast cancer. My account allowed me to share my experiences; it was my way of dealing with everything that happened to me. I didn't internalise anything. If I was in pain, or if I was worried about something, I shared it there. My mom followed that account for a while, and then I removed her from it because I think that it was a little overwhelming for her.

Many people have these ideas of someone with cancer, without hair, very skinny and with sunken eyes. They get these ideas from what they see in the media. I tried to show them how I was doing, rather than have them rely on their own ideas about cancer in their heads.

Social media also became my biggest resource. When I was going through something that I didn't necessarily want my mother or husband to worry about, I would go online for advice. I searched for other women my age going through the same things, and there were people out there who had documented their journeys. Most of those with whom I connected are in America.

Social media became a vehicle to express everything I was going through, emotionally, mentally and physically. In a way, I discovered online a sort of cancer community. It was easy – I was in the safe space of my own home, and I could be vulnerable. If someone wanted to reach out to me, or if they had something to add, they could.

Although there were some raw posts – and I have asked myself whether they were necessary – a part of me needed them, and perhaps somebody else will need them, too. My account is private, so it is not just open to everyone.

Going online gives you the freedom to be an introvert, but also an extrovert with your emotions. On that page, I realised that I was not alone. I went through a whole wave of emotions there, I asked anything and everything, and I was vulnerable and raw.

I finished my treatment and I carried on with my life. It is difficult to put that experience into words ... For a long time, everybody faffs over you, and it's all about you. Then suddenly, it's over, and it felt as if people were saying: 'You're done now. Cheers.' Treatment had been such a challenging and intense time that when it came to an end, I was left with a feeling of: 'Oh ...' The cancer becomes so much a part of one's identity. The entire journey was devastating, but the sudden end was also really hard. Perhaps I need to look at it as liberating instead: I went through this big thing in my life, and life carried on afterwards.

I wouldn't say that cancer changed me that much. I am still a little crazy, and I like to be creative. I have not suddenly become a 'seize-the-moment-because-I-nearly-died' type of person. However, it did show me the depth of the connection between my husband and me, and it did link me to women with whom I would never have otherwise connected. Other than that, I am a bit annoyed with cancer for taking my boobs away. I really liked them.

When I was doing radiation, I started making ribbon shoelaces. Creativity was a sort of therapy. I loved the fact that after a while, people no longer asked me how I was, but instead how my shoelace business was doing. That whole enterprise started because I was in bed, on my phone – and on social media – so much. I decided to try to use the time constructively, so I made shoelaces: 'Bow Toes'. I can

highly recommend being creative. If laughter is the best medicine, then creativity is the best therapy.

I am lucky that I was diagnosed quite early. That meant that my treatment could be successful. Although I had stage 4 cancer, my prognosis was good. Cancer doesn't have to become all of who you are, and you don't have to remain a cancer patient. It can become a part of your story – just something you have gone through, like dating a bad boyfriend.



J O H A N A

Yes, it's hard sometimes, but your
scars show that you are strong.
Focus on the journey ahead of you
and just love yourself.

I am a 22-year-old, second-year journalism student. My journey with cancer started back home in the Congo when I was seven or eight years old and I was first diagnosed with cancer of the bone marrow.

One day, I saw something growing on my leg – and it was already huge. At first, my parents ignored it, thinking that it would probably disappear on its own after a few days. But the ‘swelling’ never went down. So, we started visiting the hospital.

At first, I did not understand what was happening, because the doctors never told me anything – they only spoke to my parents – and I had to keep going back for check-ups. After my first operation, I remember going for an examination and the doctors telling my father that they didn’t have the resources to treat cancer in the Congo. I would have to travel elsewhere.

So, my father brought me here to South Africa. After that first operation in the Congo, I had two more operations in hospital in this country. As I recall, I had chemotherapy for the next five years. I would stay in hospital for up to a month after each operation, and I didn’t attend school for quite a while. I would have chemotherapy every Wednesday and Friday. If I was well enough, I would go back home on the Friday, and then return again on the Wednesday. It was all very draining, as after chemo I would feel so tired and vomit all of the time.

I remember that after my second operation in South Africa, I was told that I mustn't move around and that I would have to sit still. So, while everyone else was playing, I just sat there. It was a lot to deal with. We have a big family here in South Africa, and when my cousins came to visit, we would all go to the beach, but I wouldn't be allowed into the water. It was hard.

Then, after not attending school for about a year, the doctor advised that I return, so that I could keep busy. Going back to school was a good experience, and the children were really nice to me. I didn't have any hair at the time, but nobody was mean. Obviously, though, I felt self-conscious about being bald. The kids were protective over me – it was nice, but also not nice – I wanted to be able to fend for myself and not always have other people look after me.

Even though I was enrolled at school, I never actually ended up attending much. One week I would be there, and the next, not. It depended on my health. In the long run, that affected my academics a little.

When I had finished my chemo, I was informed that I was cancer-free, and my journey ended. It was then that my parents finally fully explained what had been wrong with me. They told me that the doctor had initially said to my family that I only had three months to live and that there was nothing they could do. Still, they had insisted on getting me help.

After I was declared cancer-free, I never went back to hospital, and I never had another check-up. It felt so good, and I am so grateful for my health.

No, cancer is not easy, but if you are going through it, don't give up hope. There is always light at the end of the tunnel. You just need to trust and believe in God and His plans and His timing. Sometimes He puts us in difficult situations to make us stronger.

Looking back, I think perhaps it was good that my family didn't tell me what was really wrong with me. That way, I was able to fight and not think about it all of the time. I do think sometimes it is better not to disclose all information to a child. Given the times in which we live, a child would be able to research their condition on the internet, and everything they read could be triggering. They might end up thinking that they are going to die. In a way, that could dilute their strength to fight it, because they would constantly be thinking about their diagnosis instead of fighting their condition. Just give them love and support.

I am a people-person. If someone is going through a tough situation, I just want to help them. I want to make the world a better place, especially for little kids. When I matriculated, I decided to start going to the hospital where I was treated, to hang out with the kids.

When I used to speak to other kids who were also going through cancer, many would tell me that they were being bullied at school, or that they felt insecure about their scars (I have one on my leg). I would say to everyone out there: Please be especially kind to children going through cancer. It is not an easy process, and they are going through a lot.

To those children who are being bullied: Don't let what other people say affect you or determine who you are. Yes, it's hard

sometimes, but your scars show that you are strong. Focus on the journey ahead of you and just love yourself. You are already going through enough; you don't need anything else to worry about.

My journey was not an easy one, but I am grateful to God for giving me another opportunity to be on Earth, and also to tell people that it is going to be fine. It will be fine.



CHANTÉL

Don't see cancer as a death sentence because it doesn't need to be one. There are more people who survive cancer than there are who die.

I undressed one evening and, by fluke, found a little lump in my breast. My GP sent me for a scan, and I didn't think much of it – I didn't even take my then-husband along with me. It was only when the radiologist called in a colleague that I knew that something was wrong. One breast appeared fine, but the other was not.

At that point, my whole world turned upside down. I had been in a marriage for about 10 years, and my husband had been an alcoholic for about eight of those. I had a nine-year-old daughter, and I'd been thinking about leaving my husband for a while. My diagnosis was the turning point for me. I had contracted a disease, and it was not hereditary. I believe that there are strong links between continuous trauma and cancer development. It made me think a lot.

A biopsy confirmed the diagnosis. I had stage 3, aggressive HER2-positive breast cancer.

A decision was made to perform a lumpectomy rather than a full mastectomy. My surgeon also removed some lymph nodes to check whether the cancer had spread. Everything came up clean, and the doctor said that I would probably only need radiation for two or three months.

In the meantime, I went for scans. Those results caught me off-guard: I actually had stage 4 cancer, and it had already spread into

my ribs, hips and spine. There were hundreds of spots. I needed to have full-blown chemotherapy.

I received that news five days before Christmas and it rocked my world. Apparently, I had only a 22% chance of living for five years. I knew that I couldn't leave my daughter with my husband, and that she had nowhere else to go. He was unemployed and I was the sole breadwinner. I worried about what my diagnosis would mean to us all.

In early January, I saw my oncologist. I had to undergo about six months of chemotherapy, every three weeks, for about four hours at a time. On the second-last session, they sent me for further scans to assess my progress. Nothing had changed. The cancer had not shrunk at all. It was time for plan B. I needed to have immunotherapy, but my medical aid refused to pay for it, as they believed it would only extend my life by 18 months, so wasn't worth it. I was devastated.

The next option was to combine two chemotherapies, and to administer it for up to eight hours at a time, every three weeks. After the first treatment, I developed an allergic reaction and couldn't breathe. From that point on, I had to have injections before the chemotherapy to prevent the allergic reaction. I also get injections every three weeks that work as an extra inhibitor to try to prevent the cancer from growing.

Before my second batch of chemo, I had split up from my husband. My daughter and I moved in with a single-mom friend and her two children. She looked after me through my chemo, and after my daughter, too. The chemo caused extreme fatigue, to the

point where, for six days, I couldn't even walk to the bathroom. By the fifth session, my red blood cell count had dropped so low that I needed a blood transfusion. By the sixth session, my red blood cell count and my platelets were almost non-existent. I had to have another transfusion, along with a double platelet transfusion, but my body rejected the platelets and I got sicker than before. We had to end it there. Further scans showed zero improvement. I had been through 10 months of chemo for almost nothing.

I eventually got to a point where, if the cancer hadn't spread, I took it as a win. I began taking non-stop chemo tablets – the strongest dose possible. They don't have the same side effects as normal chemo, but I do struggle with permanent fatigue, I have lost my appetite and it thins my skin. I have no fingerprints left, and I can't walk barefoot any longer.

My daughter and I now live on our own, and the tricky part has been finding the energy to work a full-time job. Being a single mom is also stressful. My ex-husband moved away and is totally out of the equation. Fortunately, the moms of several of my daughter's friends have helped out here and there, but their lives are also busy.

Over the next 18 months, I had scans every three months, but nothing changed, and the cancer remained constant. We had only managed to buy time. Then, I was due to have scans again, and I'd hit quite a downer. I had started to question why I had to go through this journey, and why it was not improving. I wondered: 'What is the point of living if I don't have any quality of life and if I have an expiry date?'

A colleague recommended a cognitive behavioural therapist. I went to see that woman for a session, which was really helpful. She

then asked me to lie down on her bed and did a healing process. I could feel the heat from her hands. She started randomly at my lower back, and the heat from her hands was intense. Then she moved to my shoulder blades, and again, the same thing happened. I asked her why she chose those two spots, and she told me that God had told her to put her hands there. Those were the two areas where I had been experiencing pain.

Soon after that, I went for a scan and then to see my oncologist. When my doctor emerged from her office, she was crying. She told me: ‘You won’t believe this, but every cancer spot in your body is healed. There is only scar tissue left.’

That was mind-blowing. Three months before, everything on the scan had shown up as active. I believe that God healed me through that woman. It was an absolute miracle, and my oncologist had no words to explain it, either. This doesn’t mean that my cancer is over, but it’s amazing news because now I no longer have to worry about dying. I am continuing with chemo, and I am on my way to remission.

I feel so blessed. I’ve been to hell and back, but I’ve been given a second lease on life. I know it is not the end ... with cancer, you never really know ... but I am here, and I am going to be okay.

This cancer journey has opened up other doors for me, too. I have started telling my story, and people want me to tell it. It means a lot to other patients on similar journeys to think that there could be hope. I was told that it was unlikely that I would last five years, but I fought for my life.

Strangely, I went through quite an emotional phase after finding out that my cancer was gone. When I should have been happy, I

was feeling sad and anxious. I went to see a psychologist, who told me that I had parked everything that I had to process outside of my cancer for the past two years, and that it had all started coming up. It has been a real rollercoaster for me, but I am now embracing my new life, and I'm excited.

Cancer or no cancer, I am fine. If it comes back, I will fight it just as hard as I did the first two times. If it doesn't return, then I will be very blessed, but either way, I will try to tell my story as often as I can to help people.

If you're diagnosed with cancer, you have to remain hopeful. A positive mindset is at least 50% of your success. Tell yourself that you are going to be okay, and stop listening to everyone around you. Don't see cancer as a death sentence because it doesn't need to be one. There are more people who survive cancer than there are who die. So, be careful what you feed your mind, and focus on the hope out there.

I know now that there is little in this life with which I can't cope. Life is precious, and it can change in an instant. No matter how hard it is, it is up to each of us to make the most out of every day.



WAHEEBAH

I always felt that with the cancer, I existed, and after cancer, I lived.

My three-and-a-half-year battle with cancer was filled with ups and downs. I was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. It was quite shocking at the time because I had always been fit and eaten healthily, so I couldn't think of anything that could have triggered it.

I had been suffering from severe abdominal pain that would last for about two hours and then disappear, before returning in the evening. Our nurse at work had treated me for heartburn and indigestion, but I had gone back to her every week. By the fifth week, she told me that I really needed to see my doctor. In my heart, I knew that there was something more serious going on, but I just wanted to ignore it.

After an examination, my doctor diagnosed gastritis and prescribed medication. The pain was still really terrible, and about a week later, I went back to him. He referred me to the hospital for a scope. At that stage, I wasn't on medical aid, so I had to go to a public hospital. The soonest I could get an appointment was two months later, so I booked it. The next night, I was still in pain, so my husband took me back to the emergency room at the same hospital. I was booked in for CT scans, MRIs, scopes and ultrasounds, and then put on a drip and sent to the ward.

The following day, a doctor came and told me that I had a blockage the length of my arm in my colon. I was so confused because I

hadn't experienced any constipation, but the blockage was nearly at the point of bursting, and it needed to be removed. I was booked into surgery for the following day. They managed to remove the blockage, and out of the original 1.5m, I was left with 20cm of my colon. They then sent a sample away for testing.

Three days later, I started to feel dizzy and faint. There was no ICU in that hospital, so after my seven-hour surgery, I had gone straight into a general ward. The nurses then moved me to a private room. I had asked a friend to help me to the bathroom because I could hardly walk. As I got there, I collapsed, and faeces started popping out of every hole in my body. It leaked everywhere and went to my kidneys, which failed.

I needed to have an emergency operation, which was an ileostomy. That is when they literally take the small intestine out of your abdomen and attach a bag to it for faeces, to give your colon a chance to heal. That operation took another seven hours, and I woke up in the ICU in another hospital. They had transported me while I was under anaesthetic.

I was unconscious for about three days after the operation, and spent about 30 more days in hospital, most of it in isolation.

I had to learn to adapt to the ileostomy, which was very frustrating. Public hospitals have their own challenges. Most of the time, I would fix the leaks in my own bag because I had supplies from the previous hospital. After the first week, I was sent back to my original hospital. There, they battled to deal with my 'output', and I was losing minerals. Although I was constantly hydrating with energy drinks and electrolyte formulas, they couldn't get it under

control, so I was sent back to the other hospital. It was quite a rollercoaster.

My time in isolation in hospital was very lonely. Only two people could be in the room at a time, and they needed to wear an apron and a mask. I felt like an alien. No one was allowed to touch me, which was hard. But I had to learn to accept the journey, in the moment, and then move forward. Accepting and reflecting was how I could heal in hospital. I just had to embrace it. So, even though I was in isolation, I could still do video calls, and I could talk to people who inspired and motivated me. That allowed me to cut all negativity and toxic people out of my life. Yes, I had many emotional times, but I never felt that I couldn't cope. I would cry, and then I would feel a lot better.

When I was eventually discharged, I had to go for chemotherapy for six months – 30 rounds in total, five days a week. I then skipped a week before going back again. Luckily, my hair just got thinner, but it never fell out. But the chemo did make my skin darker. The dark marks from my childhood acne came through again, and my nails went black. Taking cannabis oil helped with my appetite and insomnia.

Then, I got on to medical aid and went to a private oncologist. I went back to work, and I started running about five months after chemo. I stay active and am back in the gym again. Even with the bag, I still managed to run 10km at a time. Fortunately, though, about six months after chemo, I was able to have the surgery to get rid of the bag.

Then I began running even more. In fact, I ran to a point where I just couldn't stop. I ran 10km races, and even entered a marathon

three months after my surgery. During that race, I completely depleted the iron in my body. I had kept going because I wanted to be there, and I wanted to do my best time. I ended up iron-deficient for a year.

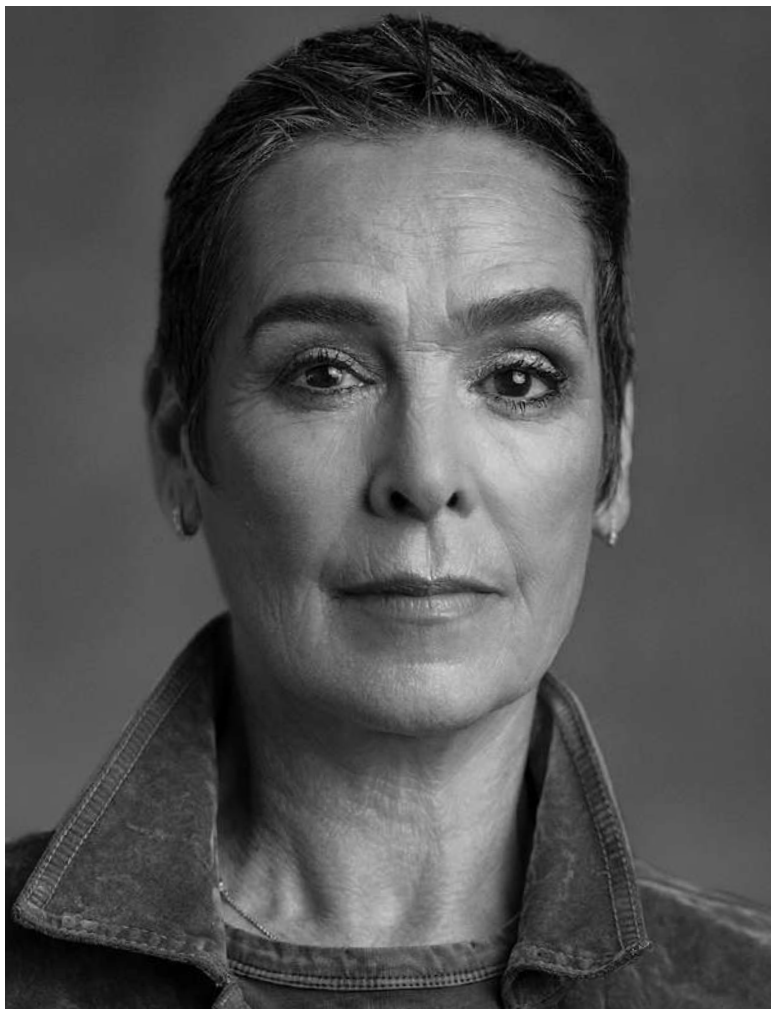
I have only recently started working out again, and I am now teaching myself how to run. I'm going very slowly and am following a running app, so that I don't kill myself! I have learnt that nothing is worth killing myself for!

Having the bag put in, saved my life. If I had not had the operation, I would probably not be here. I have a son for whom I need to be here, so that's another motivation. I just need to keep going.

I always felt that with the cancer, I existed, and after cancer, I lived. When you go through something very traumatic, you realise that the small things in life, like waking up, walking and breathing, are so important. After cancer, I really lived life to the full. I went out and did everything I wanted to do, I reached out more, and I did more inspiring things. Cancer brought me appreciation, and I have learnt to be grateful.

Cancer is not a death sentence; it is a life sentence. Not everyone gets a second chance, so you really need to embrace everything in your life. There are always other people who are going through far worse in their lives.

Although I have described many of the horrors of my journey, I also have so much hope to share. If I can endure my experience, I know that others in the same position can get through it, too. Do what your doctors tell you to do, and then get the chemo. After the hardship will come life. You have to believe that.



J E N N I

Cancer has helped me realise that
I am too much of a rescuer. I'm
slowly learning to rescue myself
and to tend to my inner child.

I don't think anybody can prepare you for cancer. Outwardly, I just coped and coped, but my inner journey was horrific.

Since the age of 16 or 17, I had always feared the word 'cancer'. The thoughts always churned in the back of my mind: 'What happens if one day I get cancer? What happens if one day I die from it?' Looking back now, I believe that my fear actually brought the cancer to me. There are two things I have feared in my life, and both of those things have happened. I have since learnt that I can no longer afford fear. The intensity of a fear is something that brings it about, no matter how you box or embrace it.

When I was first diagnosed with cancer at age 40, I thought: 'That's it. I'm going to die.' My doctor asked if they could call my husband, and I said: 'No. Unfortunately, not. There's no way that he'll cope.' Instead, I called someone from my church. She was a voluptuous, beautiful woman, and I put my head in her bosom and just cried and let out all of my tears. Then my journey started.

After that doctor's appointment, I walked into my home and realised that there was no way I could hide what had happened from my now ex-husband. You can't hide a cancer journey; you have to say it out loud. The minute I told him, he said: 'I wish you were dying today.' It was awful. After that, I walked my journey alone, except for my sons, who were with me through everything.

I had been diagnosed with breast cancer. I first had a lumpectomy and then a mastectomy. (Fifteen years later, I would have a second mastectomy.) I then had to have radiation for five weeks. My car was in for repairs at the time and the hospital was close by, so I decided to walk to the hospital every day. I also challenged myself to wear a different outfit every day, to just up my game, personally. Cancer is a lonely journey if you don't have a supportive partner.

After a few months, I decided that I wasn't going to do chemotherapy. I had to sit down in front of my oncologist and explain my decision to him. I could see him thinking: "This thing is going to save your life, but you are telling me: "No." I was absolutely terrified at the thought of chemo. I had this voice inside of me saying: 'What's the point? You're going to die.' That voice tormented me day in and day out. I don't know how I got through it, but I prayed and prayed, and eventually nine months later, it dissipated. After that, I just lived by faith. I no longer had the same fear within me. Cancer then had a face.

Every morning, I woke up, looked in the mirror and thought: 'I'm feeling good and I'm okay. I'm happy with what I see.' But, for almost two years, I didn't feel great – I was tired. Eventually, a throbbing developed in my armpit, and it wouldn't go away. Three months later, I finally went to see my surgeon. She checked me out and immediately picked up a node under my armpit. She did some pathology tests and, within 20 minutes, we knew it was precancerous. I got home about seven hours later, after further scans, tests and checks. I had a lesion on the top of my lung. We would eventually learn that I had four primary cancers.

The lung lesion was unrelated to my breast cancer – it was a smoker's cancer – as well as another type of cancer that they couldn't name. I am now at the stage of my life where I just need to sell up and go live my life. My children are old enough. I just want to live. I have started a feeding project and I'm doing what I love most – helping others.

During the lung cancer treatment, I had a very supportive partner. He took on so much stress by visiting the hospital and coming to chemo with me. He had kids, too. My journey with him ended four months after chemo, but I'm grateful for the support he offered me at that time.

On a cellular level, chemo left me quite damaged. For someone who was active, just getting up to do anything became hard. For two years, I have been living in this body that I don't know. I have two doctors who have told me that no one can go through life carrying the amount of trauma that I have experienced and expect to come out unscathed. But I say: 'Yes, they can.' I am happy. I tend to take everything negative, turn the page and then move on.

I often read about other people's journeys through cancer, and how they no longer waste time and have come to see everything as beautiful. My cancer journey never awoke anything like that within me. I suppose that for me, life was already magical. Despite the many traumas I have suffered, I have always loved life. I love the sunshine.

Although lung cancer has resulted in the two most horrendous years possible, I feel like I'm about to turn a corner. Cancer has helped me realise that I am too much of a rescuer. I'm slowly learning to rescue myself and to tend to my inner child. She needs

me. I have had to put on my big-girl socks and march through life. I need to deal with my stuff and monitor what I worry about. I now say to myself: 'I can't worry about things that I can't shape or change. I'm going to leave that back there.'

My life is about fighting for the underdog – myself. Although I'm learning so much, I'm still fearful, too. But I'm on this lovely journey of hope, and I'm turning a corner.

I would really encourage anyone diagnosed with cancer to get it out and to talk about it. Find someone to talk to, and keep talking until your heart feels okay. Talking about it also takes away the loneliness. Then that space you're in can't overwhelm and crush you.

Cancer was the journey that forced me to go inward. It all started with childhood trauma, but I have eventually started talking about that, too. I am being brave for me, which is difficult. As hard as it is, I love my life, in all of its deep corners.



ESTELLE

I won't allow darkness to take over. I crave light. I am literally always opening curtains. Light is everything to me.

When you get cancer, there is no book to read to tell you exactly what you are going to experience. You need to come to a point where you realise that you have to take it step by step, in your own way.

It was in October, during Breast Cancer Awareness month in South Africa, that two friends and I decided to get screened. I was the one who tested positive.

That year was a particularly tough one. My husband and I had faced a crisis in our business, which meant that we had to pull out all of the stops to keep our farm and business afloat. One of the things we had done was cancel our medical aid. Nine months later, I was diagnosed.

I am a mother to three boys. After my diagnosis, I cried many tears because I just didn't know what was going to happen. With cancer, everything felt so unknown. I felt like I hadn't completed my task – I had to still be here for them.

My husband and I have been married for more than 30 years, but we were so young at the time. On one occasion, I had been crying. He came to sit next to me, took my hand and said: 'I'm walking with you every step of the way.' From that moment, I realised that bond between us would pull me through.

I love to laugh – I can even laugh on my own or with my dogs, but after my diagnosis, I wondered: 'Will I ever be able to laugh

again? What is my life going to look like?’ I lived with the constant fear of: ‘What if?’ That is why I honour God for giving me inner peace. I don’t want to sound melodramatic, but you lose so much when you hear that you have cancer: Your dreams ... body parts ... there is so much to lose ... and we tend to fear all of that.

When you get a diagnosis like this, you have to allow yourself to grieve – even if it is to grieve what could happen. You are in a life-threatening situation, and you just have to stand still. When you stress, your body literally becomes acidic. You have to remind yourself of what happens when you don’t breathe and you become anxious.

After I received my diagnosis, I remember sitting in my husband’s office, hiding away. Everyone was trying to contact me, so my husband took all of the calls for me. I just needed to be quiet, but I was also craving normality. I wanted my joy back.

I was walking from the office when I saw an open Inca lily. I felt butterflies in my stomach. I was reminded that that is what you feel when happiness is about to happen. That was way before my operation, and I was still mourning my situation. My capability to find that happy moment and to embrace it for what it was, was my strength. I smell the roses while they are there. I won’t allow darkness to take over. I crave light. I am literally always opening curtains. Light is everything to me.

Although I was only diagnosed with cancer in one breast, I opted for a double mastectomy. I didn’t want to risk further cancer in the future. I really wasn’t ready to lose my breasts, but step by step, I went through all of the emotions until I eventually came to terms with it. Fortunately, I came out of hospital with lovely breasts!

At that time, I didn't have medical aid, and it would have cost a staggering amount to have my implants done privately. Although my sister and other friends offered to help, I realised that paying back that money would have been extremely stressful. I couldn't be too fancy to go into a public hospital!

Although my operation had been scheduled for a couple of months later, I got a phone call to say that they could fit me in much sooner. I was so grateful. I just wanted to get the cancer out of my body and begin my recovery. A couple of days later, I went in for surgery.

During the operation, cancer was found in both breasts. The doctor decided to remove my ovaries as well, due to the fact that the cancer had an oestrogen receptor.

Regardless of everything, my journey has been a blessing. You can't view something like this as a punishment. Obviously, I asked the questions: 'What did I do wrong?' and 'Where was I at fault?', but the grace I experienced was incredible.

I refused to lie down and be a sick person. I thought: 'Even if I die because I am sick, my mind is healthy now. I'm fine.' At that time, my youngest was 14, so he could essentially look after himself. The oldest was in matric and had a driver's licence. He could do the school run. I decided: 'I trust the Lord to heal me, but I must also do something to minimise the stress and to just be happy.'

I changed to a plant-based diet, which really did my body a favour. I also realised that I needed to feed my body lots of oxygen, which I got from fresh fruit and vegetables.

Then I decided that I wanted to play a bit and to express myself in a unique way. My sister's daughter suggested that I join a

modeling agency. Normal people can relate to me, so I have done quite a bit of modeling and catalogue work.

Sometimes, people have the wrong idea about what happiness means. It comes from within. You really have to fill yourself with good thoughts and not hold grudges. Cut people some slack. That is what you learn when you get a second chance: Be kind.

Everybody needs to be heard. I like to sit with people and listen to what their needs are. I'm always open when someone asks if they can give my number to somebody. I pray beforehand. I don't want to talk; I want to hear. Where does their pain come from?

I pray a lot and spend as much time as possible in nature. After the surgery, when I was ready again, I started training for a cycle race. I don't want any happy moment to be overshadowed by the dark feelings. Just taking my animals for a walk and seeing their happiness helps me. 'Dog' spelled backwards is God. One learns so much from their unconditional love. I seek out those moments of joy.

I once read that if you are experiencing a difficult time, put a pencil in your mouth so that your brain thinks you are smiling – even if you have to fake it to help you snap out of that moment.

Yes, you will have your dark and miserable moments, but you cannot allow yourself to stay there. Being happy is a decision. You will find something today to give you joy. It is always available to us.

I recently celebrated my 10-year anniversary since the cancer, and every day is a gift. I cannot tell my story without honouring God in it. I have grown so much as a person, and I have found myself developing in areas in which I never had much confidence before. I have also realised how much inner strength I have.

Before the cancer, I raised my children, and I was a secondary school teacher. I was always hard on myself and never felt that I was good enough. I didn't enjoy life enough because I was always busy thinking what I could do to be better and how to be more acceptable. Then I found out I had cancer ... I thought: 'What now?' Now, I model. Nobody would even give me a job beforehand.

I have stopped measuring myself against other people. I now do what makes me happy, and I embrace that. I have also stopped judging myself. I have a fulfilling marriage, and my kids are well balanced and have their own successful lives. It has all become one huge blessing. I have learnt that I am enough. I no longer put as much pressure on myself, either.

If you are diagnosed with cancer, ask yourself: 'What tools do I have to survive this?' Are you going to just sit around and be pessimistic? Keep yourself busy. Even if you are miserable today, do something small. Wash the car, or just be. We don't always have to have something to show at the end of the day. You have nothing to prove. Get through each day and be kind to yourself. All we have is now.



WINKIE

I want people to know that cancer is not the end. There is so much that can be done, and there are constant improvements happening in the medical field.

I am sharing my story in the belief that it will bring hope to somebody, somewhere. Cancer is not the end of the line – there is still life beyond it. In fact, life could be even better. You just never know.

Before I received my cancer diagnosis, I had decided it was time for a full check-up, so my gynaecologist did a pap smear and all of the necessary checks, as well as a breast examination. Afterwards, he suggested that I make an appointment for a mammogram because I was older than 40.

I went to that appointment, and before the end of the week, he told me that my mammogram results suggested that I should have further tests. At that stage, I wasn't worried. Even when I was sent for an ultrasound, I still didn't think it was serious. I was just glad that my doctors were being thorough.

Next, I was booked in for a biopsy. I still thought: 'No, I can't have cancer. Not me.' A week after the biopsy, I went for the results. The evening before, my mom asked if anyone was accompanying me because people didn't go alone to get such results. I told her that I didn't need company, but we agreed that she would accompany me to the hospital.

While in the waiting room, I read a poster on the wall. It said: 'Don't take the lump on your breast and put it on your throat.' At

the time, I didn't understand what that meant. When I walked into the doctor's room, he was paging through my file. He told me that they had found some 'malignancy' in my results. Even though I was a nurse, that word sounded strange. I realised that the doctor was telling me that I had cancer. As that lump in my throat grew, I realised exactly what that poster meant.

It was very early-stage cancer. The lump was smaller than 1cm, but I needed to wait until the afternoon to meet the multidisciplinary team. That included a social worker, who counselled me. I made up my mind to do what the doctors suggested. Then I was ushered into a little room, where I found some other cancer patients who were all hooked up to drips in their arms. I realised they were all there for chemotherapy. That was when I just cried it out. They took bloods and I met the team. I was told they were going to do a total mastectomy, and I cried all of the way home.

The following day was my birthday. So, when people wished me happy birthday, I responded: 'Thank you very much – except I have cancer!' It shocked them all. Everyone who called that day then rushed to get their own mammograms!

I had the mastectomy, and they inserted a tissue-expander at the same time. However, the following day, I had to go back to theatre because there was a fluid build-up. They opened me up and cleaned everything out, and supposedly replaced the expander with a new one, but after seven days, that fluid returned. They tried to aspirate it, but two weeks later, I was back in surgery again with an infection. They had to remove that tissue-expander.

At the time, I thought perhaps the procedure wasn't good for my body, but I was told that I just needed to heal first. I waited about

nine months and then went back. Everything went well, and I still have my prosthesis. That was 20 years ago.

It wasn't necessary for me to go for chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and I am still here. I thank God for that. I go for a check-up every year, otherwise, I am fine.

I am someone who is conscious about how I look, and I was concerned about having one breast. I am an active person and like exercising, taking walks and going to the gym. I was worried about having to undress in front of the other ladies and show my one boob. I decided to do the reconstruction – for myself.

On the other hand, I felt very fortunate because I already had my three kids and I had breastfed them, too. I realised: This is happening to me, but I am not a boob. Losing it is actually not a big deal. That was comforting to me. I was still going to be me. If anyone else had a problem with me having one boob, that was their problem, not mine. I have come to terms with the false boob, which makes me look better than before, anyway.

While I was in hospital, I was visited by a lady who shared with me her own journey through breast cancer. She had both of her boobs, and she showed me how her operations had been successful. That woman was from Reach for Recovery, and I made up my mind that one day, I was also going to do volunteer work and visit breast cancer patients who have been through the same operation. She brought me a lot of hope.

I have since joined a dragonboating group, and we got to go to Canada. Thank God, I had breast cancer. It helped turn a negative into a positive: I would never have been there if I hadn't got breast cancer. It made my life even better.

Because of the cancer, I became more serious about my health, and I watch what I eat now. I am aware of what's good for my body. I don't mind having coffee without sugar now, because sugar, I realised, is not good for cancer. I also avoid too much fat. Eating lots of vegetables is the best thing to do. I also hike and cycle. Wherever I am, I find myself preaching about healthy habits. I try my best to share what I know about cancer awareness, how to live our lives, and what we should eat. Even drinking water became important to me afterwards. I also take supplements religiously.

Those breast self-examinations are very important. If you are a younger woman, they should happen every month, a week after your menstrual cycle, once your body has returned to a normal state. Never just accept anything strange that is going on in your body. Report any growth or fluid – anything. Don't just ignore it. Rather let your doctor check it out. Also, go for your yearly check-ups, too. I hadn't even felt any lump before my diagnosis. I don't know what would have happened for me if I had not gone for that check-up. If you do have cancer and it is detected early, you are safer than if it is found later.

I want people to know that cancer is not the end. There is so much that can be done, and there are constant improvements happening in the medical field. So, whatever your diagnosis, there is hope that it can be treated. There is also nothing more dangerous than not accepting your diagnosis and refusing treatment. Just do what the doctors suggest.

The minute I was diagnosed, I told myself that I was not going to listen to any other suggestions out there, especially from my

community, where people will often advise you to treat cancer traditionally. I don't dispute that, but I suggest that people don't reject doctors' treatment.

I think my family support helped me to make the right treatment choices. I didn't get any resistance from my immediate family – my husband and my mom supported me going for the operation. I know some patients would face a dilemma, because their families would want them to see a sangoma (traditional healer). I would suggest that the mere fact that someone is in hospital and seeing a doctor means that they trust a doctor, so follow the doctor's plan.

I so wish that there could be more awareness created around breast cancer. Please, have that mammogram. More awareness is needed in remote areas, and even the townships.

I am now also a volunteer for Reach for Recovery. These days, I can't explain the fulfilment in me when I leave the hospital having spoken to a lady who I first found perhaps looking sad. I get to leave her with a big smile and hope. It does something to me. I am healed, but I still get some healing from doing that work, too.



NADIA

You can't always choose the
music that life plays for you,
but you can choose how you are
going to dance to it.

Finding out that I had breast cancer was a terrible shock. I didn't really know how to react or what to say. I think that the most difficult part was sharing it with my loved ones.

After the doctor phoned me with my diagnosis, I immediately phoned my mom. She advised me to wait to tell my husband in person and not over the phone. When he walked into the house that day, he saw the doom and gloom on my face. It was quite something to have to give him that news.

I think that overall, I was very blessed by my journey. Some days weren't easy, but that's how life goes. Even people who are perfectly healthy have good days and bad days. I was very positive about everything.

I really want to encourage others and say that a mastectomy doesn't have to be a horrific experience. You can hardly see my scar and I actually have beautiful breasts now. There is a lot of hope: You can have the operation and you can still look and feel feminine. I had my reconstruction on the same day as my mastectomy. Fortunately, I never woke up totally flat-chested, because I can imagine that must be very emotional for women. Obviously, every case is different, but I would really encourage any woman who has the option to do it all at once to choose that route. As I said to my husband, my boobs are going to sit around my neck until I am 80. And I got to choose the size of my new ones – that was a bonus!

I handled my chemo well and never had really bad side effects – possibly because I was quite young. The hardest aspect of the treatment was losing all of my hair. Initially, I thought that it wouldn't be that bad – it was just hair, and it would grow back ... Well, when it started to fall out, it took three days to go from me having a full head of hair to having nothing. It was traumatic.

Still, I rocked the bald look. I wore big earrings and bright lipstick. I didn't cover my head with wigs, but I wore a few little things that people had crocheted or knitted for me. It was quite nice to see people's reactions, and that they weren't put off by my appearance. Quite a few girls would say: 'Oh, I love your look, it's so funky.' That was a very positive experience for me.

My motto throughout my journey was that you can't always choose the music that life plays for you, but you can choose how you're going to dance to it. Often, I wanted to fire that DJ, because the song was getting way too much, but I knew that after that bad song, a better one would play.

I think the saddest part of everything that happened is the fact that I won't be able to have children. Fortunately, I am not one of those women who desperately feels the need to have children to fulfil my life – although it would have been nice. Now, I am just the cool aunty to my sisters' children. My husband's sister also has three children.

I carry the gene, the BRCA2 mutation. I recently went to see a genetic counsellor because I have to decide whether or not I am going to have a hysterectomy and my ovaries removed, too. Ovarian cancer is a second big issue for people who are carriers of the gene.

I was very blessed by the support of my family. After my second bout of chemo, I came home to find that my older sister and my parents had shaved off all of their hair. That was very special – and very emotional. My mom is one of five sisters, so I have quite a few cousins. Whenever I was feeling low, we would all wear bright lipstick – and that was a reminder to smile and to be happy.

I found that some of my friends were there for me, but others weren't. One of my friends phoned to explain to me that it wasn't that she didn't want to be there, but she didn't know what to say. I think that anyone diagnosed with cancer is going to get a lot of that: Some people just don't feel comfortable with the fact that you have cancer. It doesn't necessarily mean that they don't care, but they just don't know how to deal with the situation. On the other hand, you'll find that others you don't even consider to be friends, or whom you don't expect, will sometimes give you the most support.

My husband was truly amazing through everything. I couldn't have asked for anyone better. He was at every single chemo session, and he was at my side every time I went in for an operation. We hadn't been married for that long, but the cancer was something that we had to endure together. It was tough at times, but now I think that we can make it through anything.

I learnt through everything that there is still so much good in the world. I have also learnt how strong I am. No matter what you're going through, you can still keep a smile on your face and encourage others from the depths of your despair.

When you go through cancer, you learn so much about yourself and about life. For instance, the issue of my hair taught me a lot.

When you stand in the shower and you have no hair anywhere, it makes you feel very vulnerable. I think I also learnt that it doesn't matter how you look or what your hair looks like, people still love you; you're still the same person. I've learnt so much about inner beauty and what's going on inside my heart and inside of myself, rather than what people see on the outside. If only our eyes could see souls and not bodies, beauty would have a totally different meaning.

My husband told me that, yes, I had lost my hair, but that was how he knew he loved me. He loved me even more in that condition than on the first day he met me. I have learnt that unconditional love does exist. You never really see it in practice until you hit rock bottom, and there you'll find people everywhere, reaching out and encouraging you and supporting you. The only thing I really want in life is happiness, and to love and be loved – and I have that in abundance, from my husband, my family, my sisters' children and strangers. I believe the rest will fall into place.

My message to anybody going through this journey is simple: Even on the days when you feel really sad, try to be positive. That's what will get you through. Getting cancer is not easy, but there's always a reason why things happen to us. My journey was a gravel road – a bumpy one – but one does eventually get back on to the tar and things do get smoother again. If I could choose to reverse anything in my life, or to edit it, I would not throw away my cancer journey – simply because of the people I met and the lessons I learnt. I am still here today to tell my story and to encourage others who are going through the same thing.

I have been clear for two years, which is quite a milestone. I am thankful for my journey, although I do fear the follow-ups. Every time they do my sonar and go over the one spot for too long, I start panicking. That is a constant fear that stays with me, but I have decided that I am not going to let fear rule my life. At some point, you have to let it go and just breathe out.



M A R N A

Focus on the positive and
focus on yourself. You are
allowed to be selfish.

I was diagnosed with stage 2 cancer at the age of 37. I'd felt a lump in my breast, and my mother-in-law, who was a nurse, encouraged me to see a doctor immediately. After an initial needle biopsy, x-ray and mammogram, my GP referred me to a surgeon, who performed a full biopsy.

When I went back to see the surgeon, he called my husband in to join me and said: 'I'm not going to beat around the bush, this is cancer ...' From there, I was admitted to hospital for a lumpectomy. Two weeks after my first procedure, he phoned to tell me that I was going to have to go back under the knife. He hadn't removed enough tissue.

Luckily, though, the cancer had been detected early. After I'd recovered from the second round of surgery, I went to see the oncologist. My mom was with me when I was told that I would need to undergo aggressive treatment to counter the aggressive cancer. I had to have eight rounds of Red Devil chemotherapy.

When the doctor told me about all of the terrible side effects I was going to experience, I was scared and quite tearful, but then I started chemo, and although it was horrible, it wasn't as bad as I had expected. I was lucky to have a good support system, and my husband and my friend accompanied me to every session. If it weren't for them, my whole experience could have been so much worse.

I continued working right through my treatment. I had chemo on a Monday and would go to work the next day. Actually, I would go to work straight from the hospital, and the following day, I would work, too. Usually, the day after that, I'd feel ill and stay at home. My workplace was fantastic, and our CEO told me not to worry about work and to focus on getting healthy again, which I did.

After the chemo, I had 36 sessions of radiation. I didn't experience any bad side effects at the time, but it did affect me in the long term. My ribs became so fragile after the treatment that they have cracked two or three times.

I continue to go for my annual check-ups, and now, 12 years later, I'm still here to tell the story! I must say that each of my follow-up checks is nerve-wracking. I'm always worried that something will go wrong again. Cancer is no laughing matter, but I have just tried to stay positive throughout everything.

I think my whole cancer experience was even harder for my family, particularly my kids, than it was for me. My daughter was in Grade 4 at the time, and my son was in Grade 1. After my lung was punctured by a cracked rib, I spent eight days in hospital. Although I didn't feel that bad, I looked really sick, and that affected my children. I had gained 10kg from the chemotherapy, I was on oxygen, and I had no hair, no lashes and no eyebrows, which never really grew back. It was hard for the kids to see.

Losing my hair was horrible, but the loss of my lashes was worse, and I couldn't even wear make-up. I think that for any woman, not having hair, lashes or brows can be one of the hardest parts of the

whole process – apart from the fact that you just really want to heal and be there for your family and see your kids grow up.

If you are a negative person, it is easy to sit in a hole and feel sorry for yourself, but my support system was really amazing. My mom, my friends and my husband got me through it all. My children were young, so they didn't really understand what was happening, but I just knew that to look after them, I needed to look after myself, too.

When I think back to the number of times I lay crying ... At one stage, I began falling into a depression. So, I thought: 'Okay, let me just pull myself together.' Depression is a very ugly thing. I really do think that what you make out of your situation is your own decision. You have to work on yourself to make sure you don't get depressed. So, I went to work ...

The reality is that while you are going through it, cancer is terrible, and you don't know if you are going to survive, but you have to be strong and focus on the positive things in your life so that the cancer and chemo don't pull you under. Your mind is so strong that it can actually influence whether you live or die – or that's what I believe. Focus on the positive and focus on yourself. You are allowed to be selfish. Rest enough and make sure that you push through it, because you can't go dig a hole and sit in it. Then you definitely won't survive.

Cancer has been a real game-changer in my life. I have become far humbler and am better able to understand others now. I now have empathy for others in every area – not just sickness. I'm told that I wasn't like that before, and I know that I'm far softer now. I guess that I have just become more sensitive. I think that I have done things in my career that I would not otherwise have managed.

I feel really blessed to still be here. I survived. I get to see my kids grow up, and I can continue my life and my marriage with my husband. I've been given a great gift – the gift of life. I'm not scared to die, but to be able to be with my kids and husband and to plan my life and retirement is amazing.



N O R A H

There were dreams that I needed to fulfil in my life. The main thing that makes me brave and strong is that I want to live for my children.

I feel blessed that my cancer was caught early on – I was stage 3. When I was 39 years old, I conceived a baby. I had two boys already and hadn't expected to fall pregnant. I didn't feel ready for motherhood again – but then I found out that I was having a little girl ... I knew I had to keep her.

I gave birth at age 40. My youngest son is 16 years older than my daughter, so after her birth, I decided that I needed a reliable form of contraception. The clinic suggested that I get a loop, so they did a pap smear and all of the other necessary checks beforehand. That was when they felt something in my right breast – a lump. I was referred for a mammogram. After that, I was scheduled for a biopsy.

The biopsy confirmed that I had cancer – precancer, to be precise. The doctor told me that it was all over the breast, not only in one spot, and the whole breast would have to be removed. I didn't want to end up in a situation where, three years down the line, I developed cancer in the other breast, so I agreed to have both of my breasts removed. A reconstruction was planned for afterwards.

Some women think that if you don't have breasts, you are incomplete, but I told my doctor that I had to live for my children. I had my mastectomies and spent five days in hospital. Tissue testing showed that the cancer hadn't spread, so I wouldn't have to

do chemo, and I didn't even have to take any medication. I just needed to go for yearly checks.

On one of my check-ups after the operation, my breast had still not healed. It was oozing and more painful than ever. I was readmitted to hospital because the breast had become infected. They removed the implant, and I was left with one, which I really didn't want to happen.

I took a long break after that before going back for my second implant. The surgeon didn't do as good a job that time round, but I refused to go back for a third time. I said: 'No. As long as I have a shape, I'm happy.' I didn't go for any further treatment after that.

I was born in Lesotho, but my mom was from Cape Town. We grew up very poor, but I told myself that there were dreams that I needed to fulfil in my life. The main thing that makes me brave and strong is that I want to live for my children. I don't have a sister or mother – it's only me and the children. Who would take care of them if I was not around?

The support of my colleagues and my boss really gave me strength. When I was first referred for a mammogram, the only thing on my mind was that I was going to die. I cried all the way to hospital, and people kept stopping to ask if I was okay. I never thought that such a thing would happen to me. I arrived back at the office in tears. My boss really encouraged me and told me that I was going to make it through everything. He told me to just give it time and to be positive, to think about my children and about my future.

When I got home, I sat down and thought about everything for a long time. I said: 'No, this cancer is not going to kill me.' But that thought came back again, and I really feared having chemotherapy.

I was convinced it was going to kill me. But fortunately, I didn't have to do chemo.

Being strong for my little daughter kept me strong. I had a lot of support from friends, too. One of my friends took in my daughter from the time I went into hospital until I was properly healed. She made sure that she ate, went to creche and visited me. My daughter used to cry every time she had to leave me, so it was tough. Other friends would come and clean my room and do everything for me that I couldn't do when I couldn't move around.

When I was first diagnosed, I called my ex-boyfriend, the father of my daughter. We had just broken up, but I thought he needed to know what was happening. His response was: 'What kind of woman are you going to be without breasts?' I told him that if breasts make me a woman, then I will be no woman, but that won't define who I am. He refused to help out with our child while I was in hospital.

I have since met someone. Dating a new person was tough. I said to him: 'I don't know how you are going to take it, but that is entirely up to you. I'm a breast cancer survivor.' I had to explain to him that what he saw were not my natural breasts. He was fine with everything – even the fact that I am scarred and don't have nipples.

That man accepted me just as I am, and he reminded me that what's important is inside: What you do with yourself and how you carry yourself.

My family and friends wanted me to have treatment rather than having my breasts removed. I refused – I was not going to see a traditional healer. I don't feel that those people are educated to treat me. I told everybody: 'This is my cancer, not your cancer, and if you want to do that, then do it for you, but not for me.'

In black communities, there is a lack of knowledge around cancer. There were so many things that I didn't know. Cancer is in my family, but I didn't know much about it. My mom had it in her womb; one of my aunts had it in her breast and went for surgery, and my other aunt also had it in her breast, but she died. The black community needs to be educated, and also told that losing a part of your body is not the end of the world. You are still the same person you were before that part was removed. We black women rely on our men who are not even there for us. Many black men are very stubborn and have very little knowledge about women and sickness. When I was in hospital, people even said that my ex-boyfriend left me for someone else because I had cancer!

Education could bring about big changes in our black communities, because we women really struggle. There are people in my community who know that I am a survivor. Some come to me for advice, and others talk badly about me, but that doesn't change who I am.

We cancer survivors must be brave. Be positive and tell yourself that cancer is not going to kill you. I told myself that I am not going to die from cancer. If I have to die, it will be by accident, then there is nothing I can do about it. If you say that cancer is going to kill you, then it will. It will be beyond the power of the doctors.

You have to think about the future, about next year, and about the things that you want to see happen. For me, I really want to see my daughter graduate. She is now nine years old, but I will wait patiently until then.



T A S H A

I have learnt to enjoy every
moment in life because tomorrow
is not guaranteed to anyone.

My breast cancer experience was a real struggle, but speaking to other women who had been through the same thing as me, yet kept a positive attitude, really inspired me. I would love to be that person to others, too.

When I found out I had cancer, I went into survival mode and pretended that everything was okay. I knew I had to get through it – I didn't really have a choice. The only way to do that was to be strong, put my head down and carry on. When you have cancer, everyone else carries on with their normal lives, but your world stands still. You're not moving forward, you are just waiting around; waiting for your next surgery, waiting for your next scan, your next test, or your next call from the doctor. Just waiting, waiting, waiting ... It's not like you get diagnosed, go for treatment and then you're okay and everything goes back to normal. That's not how it happens. It's with you forever. Every single day.

I was very overwhelmed by all of the information that the doctors gave me. I would latch on to things they said without really understanding what they meant, so I ended up having to do a lot of my own research to figure out what my test results actually meant. I would really advise anyone with a cancer diagnosis to write down their questions and to then get those answers from their doctor. Because nobody told me, and I didn't ask, it was several months before I even knew what stage cancer I had!

I also felt very unlovable during that time. I was really young, and I think I retracted into myself. I couldn't understand how my then-boyfriend could still love me. My diagnosis, eventual operation and treatment left me feeling very damaged. I didn't feel attractive or sexy anymore – and that was possibly the most difficult part of the whole experience for me to manage.

I decided to combine my conventional treatment with natural options, which boosted my immune system. That helped me to feel much better about life, and that I was doing something good for my body. I learnt over time that you can't control what happens to you, but you can control how you react to it – and deal with it.

After 16 sessions of radiation and, eventually, a double mastectomy, my treatment ended abruptly. My next MRI was scheduled for nearly a year later. I was left with a feeling of: 'How do I know if I am clear?' In truth, I couldn't know. I just had to wait for the scan. That was a massive struggle. I just wanted someone to check me out and tell me that I was okay, but it was too soon after the radiation to get an accurate result.

After a horrible year, my boyfriend and I felt that we needed a proper holiday. We decided to go to Mauritius, but we didn't want to finalise our booking because I was scheduled to have my MRI. On the day of my scan, I was really nervous, but it showed no signs of cancer. When I got the results, I just started crying – it felt like a weight had been lifted off of me. So, off we went to Mauritius. There, on a catamaran, my boyfriend proposed to me.

He was amazing throughout my entire cancer ordeal. He had also gone into survival mode and would say: 'This is what we are

going to do ... Do this, do that ...' Only after everything was over, and after my scan had come back clear, did he break down and admit to me how difficult it had been for him to stay strong for me throughout that time. I so appreciate that, but I think at the same time, I wanted people to show me vulnerability, too.

Most people in my support network were strong for me. Some people left me to get through my treatment and prayed that everything would go back to normal. Not everyone deals with grief in the same way. Some felt that they were being supportive by giving me privacy, but I also really needed people to tell me that I was going to be okay, and that they still loved me through it all.

The support from my work was amazing, too, and they gave me the time I needed when I wasn't well. Luckily, though, I didn't need to take that much time off work. My mom is in New Zealand, but she offered as much support as she could from where she was.

To those supporting a cancer sufferer, I would say: Be strong, but also don't be scared to show your vulnerability, or how much that person means to you. Don't be scared to cry and say: 'I love you and I'm scared of losing you, and I'm here for you and I'll fight for you until the end.' They need to hear that they are important to you.

Before cancer, I don't think that I really used to care much about myself. You only have one body, and you have to look after it. If you don't, then it's going to start giving you problems. I now just appreciate life and everything around me. Even just waking up in the morning... I never used to think about it, but now I do.

For a very long time I was trying to find myself. Now, I feel like I am a much better friend, partner, daughter – and a better person

overall. I realised that I was just wasting my life. Now, I love myself, even with my scars.

My cancer is something that I think about every day. It is not something that will go away – especially because I'm at a high risk of metastatic cancer. Even though my test results are clear, I'll never really have closure.

Inspiring others is important to me. To other cancer fighters, I would say: Try not to sweat the small stuff. That might sound clichéd, but I know that I used to get stressed and quite moody. Since my diagnosis, I've had a lot more patience, and I'm kinder to other people. I always thought that I was invincible, and never imagined that it could happen to me. I've learnt to enjoy every moment in life because tomorrow is not guaranteed to anyone. It's important to remember: Cancer doesn't define who you are and how much people care about you. You are stronger than you think you are.



P E T R O

We are all going to die at
some stage, so if you think
about dying all the time,
then you forget to live.

I was 24 when I was diagnosed with cancer. I had felt something strange and painful in my arm, as well as a little knob on my left breast. It definitely didn't feel normal.

The following day, I went to the doctor, who told me that I would need to go for a biopsy. A week later, I got the results: I had breast cancer.

Cancer was something totally new to me, and I knew little about it. I thought I was going to die. When I received that call from my doctor, it was just before December, and I was about to leave on holiday. So, I went on holiday knowing that I had cancer, but not being able to do anything about it. After my vacation, I focused on how I could get treatment as soon as possible. The 'knob' was getting bigger by the day – it was growing fast.

I didn't have medical aid, so I had to go through the public system. I went to a smaller hospital in the hope that I would be able to find a way to fast-track my treatment, but after a few tests, I was referred to another, larger hospital. That had already taken several months. My aunt knew an oncologist, and she agreed to pay for an examination with him.

During that appointment, the oncologist told me that the cancer was growing fast. Fortunately, though, he enrolled me in a trial.

The trial was amazing: It made me feel like there was a plan. It gave me access to the best chemotherapy, too. I had to go for the

Red Devil, which was not nice. Instead of having chemo, followed by an operation and then radiation, they did the chemo and the radiation together upfront, and the operation followed afterwards.

My breast cancer didn't come back, but I did have to have a double mastectomy. Because I had the radiation before the operation, it had affected my skin and tissue. My doctors struggled to perform the double mastectomy. I was in hospital for two weeks after the operation.

I had been home for two or three days when I started feeling really ill and developed a fever. I told my then-boyfriend, now-husband, that I didn't feel well. Suddenly, I started to throw up. Something was not right. My boyfriend, my sister and my father rushed me back to the hospital. Because I wasn't bleeding, I was triaged in the system and had to wait for care. The staff put me in a bed and told me that they would get to me. At midnight, they told my boyfriend to leave and that they would look after me. Between 3am and 4am the next morning, a new doctor arrived. As he walked in, I recognised him. It was a friend of mine.

He checked me out and told me that I needed treatment right away. He wanted to give me an injection, but couldn't find a vein in my arm, so he had to inject me in my leg. My doctor was then called in. I was taken to the ward where they tried to lower my fever. I was told that I had to have emergency surgery, or I wasn't going to make it. My left implant was infected and had to be removed. After that, I had to do another round of the Red Devil, which wasn't any fun.

Only after everything healed, eight or nine months after chemo, were they ready to replace the implant. I went into surgery with the

same doctor and the same surgeon, but when I came out, they told me that they hadn't been able to replace the implant. When they had opened me up, they had found that the tissue inside had been too damaged. I said: 'That's fine. At least I'm still alive.'

After I had recovered, I found a company that makes bras that hold prostheses. These are really easy and comfortable to slip on. It's a little more difficult to swim wearing a prosthesis, as it keeps falling out, but it isn't that bad. At a later stage, I do want to fix my breast. It would be nice.

My husband then got us on to a medical aid, but I had to wait a year to use it. We got to 11 months and two days ... then I started experiencing black-outs. My left side would go numb, and I would simply black out for about five seconds.

One day, I got back from the gym. I climbed out of the car and went to the gate to open up the shop. As I did so, everything went numb and I blacked out, yet I still felt like I was 'there'. I called to a guy inside the shop to help me, and I just held on to the gate. My left side was very numb and sore, and I had lost my sense of balance. Luckily, we were about a minute away from the hospital.

I phoned my husband from the Emergency Unit. After hearing my history and that I had just come from the gym, the doctor told me that I had overworked myself and that I should go home and rest. About three months later, while I was sleeping, I had a seizure. That's when they found a tumour in my brain. It had metastasized from the breast. My surgery was timed so that my new medical aid would kick in. I'm now in remission, and have been for about five years.

My journey was tough, but at the same time, it wasn't. I had so much support around me. My workplace continued to pay my full salary, even though I wasn't working. I also had my family and my husband-to-be. My friends were also incredibly supportive – they were amazing. When I lost my hair, one friend said: 'We are going to get some wigs – pink ones and blue ones – and we are just going to go crazy.' It wasn't that bad.

There were a few people in my life who couldn't handle it, or didn't agree with my route of treatment, but luckily, I had other people, too. If I hadn't had those people, I wouldn't have made it.

The medical team that worked with me were just incredible, too. I got the best treatment ever. It doesn't matter if you have to have private or public treatment, both of them are great. I will never forget a nurse who told me: 'Just remember one thing: Don't change anything that you are doing at the moment. Don't go and say that you have cancer now, so you have to change your life. You have to do exactly what you did before you were diagnosed. If you walk 10 miles a day, go and do that. If you went out and partied, go and do that. Tone it down, yes, but don't stop seeing your friends. Stay as normal as possible.' That was such amazing advice. I listened to her, and her advice saved my life.

Getting through those scary, alone moments was hard, but something inside of me told me to fight. If I found myself getting into that bad space of worrying about what was going to happen, and thinking: 'Will I see 30?' I just stopped myself and said: 'No! Don't think like that. Get out of this space.' Then I just started to do something else. I try not to go there. I know that if I stay in that place, it can get very dark.

I think that if you have cancer, you need to stay positive. It can be difficult and sad, and you are going to get dark phases when you think about everything that is happening to you, but you just have to do whatever you can to stay positive.

I always say: '*Hou asem*' (just breathe). Before the cancer, I had studied for a Bachelor of Commerce. I was ready to go into a corporate career. Through everything that happened, I realised that I needed to relax, and that perhaps that wasn't a good idea. It would have been a very stressful work environment. My husband and I do have a lot of stress, but we have so much more time to do things for ourselves. I've realised that in life, you only have a certain amount of time, and in that time, you have to do what you want to do, and to focus on what you want to focus.

At the beginning, I really thought that I was going to die. Later, when I started talking to people and hearing stories from others, I realised that people actually made it through cancer. The more stories I heard, the more I thought that perhaps I could get through it, too. You can survive cancer, and that's important. You can make it.



LAUREN

No matter what the outcome
of your cancer diagnosis, your
strength and resilience will
surprise you.

I had been working in a high-stress job when I detected that something was not quite right in my breast. People I knew had decided to do ‘Oc-sober’, which was a campaign around not drinking for the month of October, and I thought that sounded like a good idea, too. I was in a place where I was aware of my own health, so I decided to participate and to use the time to do all of my necessary medical checks. Of course, October is breast cancer awareness month in South Africa, too.

I remember: It was a Sunday afternoon, and I was lying in bed, reading. All of a sudden, in my left breast, I felt what seemed like sunburn. I hadn’t been in the sun, and my breasts just had this very odd feeling, so I decided to make an appointment with my GP.

My doctor did a quick examination and told me that she couldn’t feel anything. However, I was 44 and had never been for a mammogram, so we thought perhaps it was time for one. I was scheduled for both a mammogram and a sonar. During the sonar, the woman said: ‘I am just going to go call the doctor.’ In that moment, I knew that my worst nightmare had come true. I was told that there was definitely something behind the nipple and that I would need a biopsy. Two days after the biopsy, I was told: ‘You need to go and see a surgeon ...’

The surgeon said to me: ‘I can tell you now, you are not going to die from this, but you must decide if you want to deal with it

now and have the mastectomy, or do chemo and see what we can do.' At 44, I was still relatively young. I had a husband, and a nine-year-old daughter, and I just wanted to get it sorted out. I had a job to get back to, and I didn't want the whole issue to impact on my career. I opted for the mastectomy and, fortunately, the cancer was relatively contained. It was just a few days from the time I felt something in my breast to the time my breast was removed. I then started chemotherapy as soon as I had healed.

I was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer. Fortunately, it was caught early. I always say to women: 'If you get a feeling that something is not right, then act on that. Don't think that you are being ridiculous; and don't listen to anybody who says its nothing and that you'll be fine. Rather go and get yourself checked out.'

I don't say that I'm in remission, I say that I'm cancer-free – and I'm cancer-free because I acted early and decisively. My cancer treatment was quite conservative, and I chose to have a mastectomy because I couldn't face potentially having to live with breast cancer as an ongoing concern in my life, more than was necessary. I had a unilateral mastectomy. They then did genetic testing, and there was no concern. I am the first woman in my family to have breast cancer.

When I look at my life and what happened subsequently, I am immensely grateful for the cancer. I had my mastectomy in the October, and less than two months later, on 21 December, my mom, my husband, my child and I were going on holiday to Mpumalanga. We were in a car accident and my mom and husband were killed.

I am grateful to cancer because my diagnosis brought my mom, myself and my husband closer. My husband and I had been married

for 11 years and we had one daughter. There were issues in our marriage, but not major ones. I think that as with any marriage, and with my career, I had expected him to do certain things and to behave in certain ways, which caused me frustration. Then, when I was diagnosed – the way he dealt with it and handled it ... the way he comforted me ... and just the way he was – I looked at that man and thought: ‘Nothing else matters. This is why I married you. This is why I chose to have a child with you.’ It connected the two of us incredibly. My mom and I, too. She came to look after me when I started chemo. I think that if I hadn’t had cancer, and the accident happened, I would feel very differently now. I would be carrying a lot of guilt, anger and frustration.

Right after the accident, my daughter was just sitting on the embankment, and I knew that I needed to get to her. I knew that my mom had already passed away, and I said to my husband: ‘I need to get to her. I know you understand.’ My ankle was trapped by the clutch pedal, and my left arm was broken. Somehow, I was able to bend that clutch and get my ankle out so that they could remove me from the car and I could get to my child. I didn’t know if my husband was going to survive or not, but I knew that my daughter was going to make it. I knew that if she survived, I would survive, too. I am immensely grateful that I have my daughter, because if I didn’t, I wouldn’t be sitting here today. I know that for a fact.

I am often viewed by others as being quite a strong person, but I prefer the word ‘resilient’: Someone who manages and bounces back. The two people in the universe who knew I was not as resilient as I then seemed were my mom and my husband. I think, maybe, they had seen me through what they thought would have been the

worst possible thing that could happen – breast cancer – and they had the comfort of knowing that they could leave.

During the cancer, in the months leading up to December, the amount of love, compassion and kindness that I felt from family and friends and colleagues was amazing. Then I went through that accident, and I was hospitalised. I was in a wheelchair and off work for a while, and I had to start walking again. Once again, the love, commitment, kindness and openness to helping and supporting me was phenomenal. At the time, I was the municipal manager of a small town in South Africa, and to this day, when I think back to that place, I remember it being so open with love. The whole town just opened its heart. It was amazing. I didn't know it was possible for an instant to unleash so much kindness and to give so much to somebody. It buoyed me.

That unconditional love is there for us all. We don't open ourselves up to it; we don't see it, and likewise, we don't show it every day because we don't have something on which to focus it. When I went through everything, people would always ask: 'Why you?' But why not me? I have a million reasons why it should rather have happened to me than to someone else.

I have always thought that it is not about me; it is about my child. She is now 17. One day, this journey is going to lead her some place where she needs to show empathy. I think that going through what she did at nine years old forms one in a particular way. The day is going to come where she will be able to draw on that and comfort someone, or some people, who need somebody to demonstrate resilience and to help and empathise with them.

Cancer will make you stronger. Even if your body is weak or frail, your soul is stronger than you ever thought possible. No matter what the outcome of your cancer diagnosis, your strength and resilience will surprise you. Some of us are fortunate enough to be cancer survivors, and others of us have different outcomes. Whatever your journey is, I think the gift of cancer makes you incredibly resilient, and a giving and honest person. You suddenly realise that everyone has their stuff, and that stuff doesn't actually matter when you get down to the important things in life.

When you are on this journey, you need to find spaces, places and people that bring you joy. That is what you must hang on to. For me, it was my daughter. If you can find that, it makes the journey a little bit easier, because then you have something worth fighting for.



INSAAF

The unknown is always scary, and that's okay, too. Take one day at a time and don't rush it. God has a plan for you, so keep your faith.

The weekend my daughter turned two, I detected a lump in my breast. It was big – half the size of my breast – and I was still breastfeeding at the time. My GP thought it was just a blocked milk duct, but sent me for an ultrasound anyway, which didn't pick up anything. He prescribed anti-inflammatories and told me to wait six months, but I knew in my gut that something was wrong. Six months prior to that, my sister had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

Six months passed and the lump hadn't disappeared. I made an appointment with a breast specialist. After examining me, she said: 'I don't know what kind or stage it is, but that is cancer.' I don't think her words registered immediately, but I was sent for a mammogram and another ultrasound, and the tests confirmed the diagnosis.

That's when my life suddenly changed, and everything went crazy. All I could think of was my children: My daughter was two, and my sons were five and seven. Survival mode just kicked in and I knew that I'd do what it took to survive.

After my lumpectomy, they discovered that I had lobular cancer, which is why it hadn't shown up on the scans. I was referred to an oncologist. My doctors decided not to do a full mastectomy, and sent me straight to chemotherapy. I used to have long, beautiful hair, but I'm loving my short hair now. For me, losing my hair was

just something that had to happen during chemo. I could only think about getting better in that moment.

At the time, I was still very career-orientated, and a practising attorney looking at partnership, but I began to question my purpose in life. Up until then, it had all been about work, work, work, but I had a family, and I had to get through everything I was facing. I had to make a decision: My career or Insaaf?

Although I had aggressive chemotherapy for six months, I continued to work during chemo because I wanted to keep things as normal as possible for my children. When they saw me getting up each morning, dressing and then dropping them off, they knew that everything was okay. I didn't want them to see me ill.

Luckily, my chemo journey wasn't that bad, and it gave me time to reflect on my life. I ate healthily and made sure to take my tablets on time. After six months of chemo, my oncologist suggested that I have a bilateral mastectomy, and referred me to a fabulous breast surgeon. The following March, I had both breasts removed, followed by a reconstruction. That took almost an entire year.

The reconstructive surgery was invasive, and it was hard. I wanted it to look natural, but I had lost weight during chemo, and I didn't have enough belly fat to make two boobs. The reconstruction happened in stages, and I had an anaesthetic almost every other month for an entire year. It is not finished yet – I still have no nipples.

While all of that was happening, I met a lady from Reach for Recovery, which is a support group that does dragonboat paddling. I joined the group, and had the opportunity to paddle in Spain and

represent South Africa. Since my diagnosis, I have travelled and also started hiking and running. I don't think I would have had those opportunities if I had just continued in the rat race, working from 6.30am until 8pm every day. I believe that things in our lives happen for a reason – and there is a reason that cancer happened to me.

I started a new job two years ago, and it was hard, but I managed. I'm not the same Insaaf any longer. I want to live in the moment and do things. I sometimes surprise myself with what I say and do!

Cancer is not an automatic death sentence. Something will emerge out of it that will help you look at life differently. The unknown is always scary, and that's okay, too. Take one day at a time and don't rush it. God has a plan for you, so keep your faith. You also need to keep positive. What you are going through is part of your journey. Everything in life brings us lessons that teach us to become better people. Be patient with yourself.



C H R I S T I N A

Despite your diagnosis, you can still be radiant and positive, and you can come out the other side looking really good.

My journey started after a routine check-up with my gynae. Two tumours were discovered in my ovaries, and I needed an operation to remove them, along with a biopsy.

I was diagnosed with lymphoma and told that I would have to undergo chemotherapy. Right from the outset, I was confident that I wouldn't die. I remained really positive and decided to embrace the journey and everything that I needed to do to get better, both medically and holistically. That involved more than just supporting myself with chemo. I knew that there were other things that I could do, too, like eating well and taking care of myself.

Somehow, I just had this inner determination and resilience. I thought: 'I'm going to do it, and it's going to be fine.' Obviously, I couldn't be naïve about it: I knew that cancer meant that my life would change, but I had to take it one step at a time. I underwent chemotherapy for just under four months, followed by a post-chemo treatment for the lymphoma, which went on for about a year.

During my treatment, I battled with the usual issues, like nausea, and my big fear – losing my hair – became a reality. That was hard. I couldn't bring myself to shave off all of my hair right at the beginning – I literally had to see it fall out. I clung to every single strand right

until the very end. Then, when I had about five strands left, I cut it off. But I just had to embrace that, too. That was a strange time. Suddenly, I looked at myself differently.

With my hair gone, I thought: ‘Now what?’ It was almost like I entered a new phase. When it began growing back, it was totally grey – and curly. I had always had straight hair before. Somehow, that showed me what chemotherapy really does to the body. There’s an effect that stays, and you look different afterwards. I had always been a very feminine woman with long, blonde hair. I liked to look after myself and wear make-up, so it was very strange to initially look so different. But I got used to it.

I celebrated my hair growing back by booking a photoshoot while I still hardly had any hair. Those pictures are stunning – and I did that just for me. When I look at those photos now, I see a vibrancy within. I look full of life, positivity and energy. That’s really how I felt, and how I still feel now. Despite your diagnosis, you can still be radiant and positive, and you can come out the other side looking really good.

Apart from the chemotherapy – which involved someone else looking after me – I changed my diet. I had always been a healthy eater, but I became very conscious of what I ate and didn’t eat. With chemo, your appetite changes dramatically. It’s as if your body tells you what you no longer enjoy. For instance, I enjoy a good cup of coffee, but during chemo, it was the grossest thing ever. I had never been a big alcohol drinker, but now I don’t drink at all – I just don’t like it. So, certain things change, and you adapt. But there are healthy choices you can make, like eating plenty of greens, drinking green juice, and supporting yourself with vitamins.

I also became aware of what might and might not be beneficial to my body during treatment. I did some oxygen therapy, which was good for my scar-healing at the time. I had first had an operation to remove all of my female organs. That was major surgery then, although it has become quite routine nowadays. It took about two weeks before I could walk properly, but that was simply part of what needed to be done. I knew there was an end goal, so I just got on with it.

I think that self-care means different things to different people. For me, it involved more time for me, eating well, and basically softening the intake of all sorts of stimulation around me. I became more conscious of what I let in and of the people with whom I surrounded myself. In a way, my world was quite small, but it was good because it was simplified. I meditated and did other little things, like taking time for myself and not rushing all the time. I quietened down and spent time with my animals.

During treatment, I carried on with my normal routine as much as I could. I worked throughout my chemo, except for a few days when I literally couldn't get to my feet. I work in event and wedding planning, which is an intense industry, but my team really stood up and did so much. My clients were really understanding, too. Somehow, life sorted itself out around me.

I'm not quite sure how I stayed positive. I never once had to put on a fake smile. I just thought: 'I'm in really good hands and I'm looking after myself. I've been told it is treatable, so it's not the end of the world. It's going to be an interesting few months and I'm going to come out with some learnings.' I think, perhaps, it was a matter of personality, too. I tend to embrace things and to

be forward-thinking. I had a lot of support, and the love and care I received was crucial. My husband was my absolute rock.

A friend came out from Germany during that time, but unfortunately, my parents are quite far away, and they don't travel anymore. My sister has four kids and is terrified of flying, so she couldn't come out then, either. So, a lot of my support was energetic. I had many people loving me, thinking of me and praying for me from a distance. Support does not have to be in your immediate vicinity – it can come from anywhere.

I really love life, and I love living my life exactly how it is. I now feel like I've got strength to do anything. That's partly because of my cancer journey, but not entirely. I still don't know why I had cancer, but it does remind me of my inner strength.

Cancer really was a gift: In terms of the love I feel, the love for myself I uncovered, and the fact that I survived it. It almost felt like putting on a different set of glasses and seeing things slightly differently. Yes, I still eat lots of chocolate, cheese and muffins, which I briefly stopped during chemo, but I went back to that because I love it.

After my treatment, I had a scan, which came back clear. I think the key is to look after yourself afterwards, too. And I try, but I can always do better. There are certain things that I know benefitted me then that I should have perhaps continued, but I haven't. For instance, I no longer have a green juice every day. I recently had my six-month check-up, and everything is fine.

I learnt that whatever life throws your way, there is a way to deal with it. It might not be easy, and it's going to be scary at times, but life carries on. The cancer shouldn't become everything. Even

though I had the treatment, and it was a big part of my life for six months, it was still not my whole life – and that's important. You can't just give in to this one big thing. You have to carry on with everything else as best as you can.



DANIELLE

We warriors have an inner
strength, and we don't know
how strong we are until
strength is our only choice.

I was on tour in Guangzhou, China, playing my dream role of Evita in the stage musical. I was seeing a guy on tour who found a lump in my breast.

An ultrasound proved inconclusive, so an MRI was scheduled. After that, the doctors told me it looked like early-stage breast cancer, but they couldn't be 100% certain until I had gone for a biopsy. However, they couldn't do that in case I was deemed unfit to fly. It had to be done in South Africa. I was in a state of shock. In my mind, there was an invader in my body that needed to be removed as soon as possible. I felt such panic.

When I returned home, I had the biopsy and the mammogram. The cancer was grade 3 – aggressive. I was going to have to have a double mastectomy. I was forced to give myself a pep talk: 'They're only breasts ... I will get an upgrade ... They're at an age when they will start to sag ...' But my breasts had served me well up until then, so it was difficult. I had to make peace with the fact that I needed the mastectomy to save my life. What good are perky breasts if I'm six foot under?

I didn't want this whole experience to be in vain, so I started a blog and channeled all of my energy into that. Having that outlet every day proved very therapeutic. The night before my double mastectomy, I had a ceremony in my bath to say goodbye to my breasts. I gave them one last look and one last hug. After the surgery,

I had expanders in my chest and there was a bit of a bump, so it wasn't a huge shock. I was okay. I survived it.

Around the time I started chemotherapy, COVID-19 hit, and I was petrified. But when I walked into the chemo room, it was fine. It was a very relaxed environment, everyone was very friendly, and the nurses were amazing. Chemo wasn't that bad, either. I went every two weeks: I lay back, got a hot meal and put on a 45-minute meditation.

After my second chemo session, my hair started to fall out. That was very traumatic, so I decided to make my hair loss the most spiritual journey of my life. I believe things that manifest in the physical body are usually from a route of trauma, or things that we have been carrying that no longer serve us. I was determined to get rid of that weight, and I needed to unpack and figure out what it was before I lost my hair. Then someone sent me the most beautiful article on how women in India go to temples and shave off their hair as a sacrifice for a miracle. I needed my miracle to be my healing. I wanted to do the work and be ready, so that when I shaved my hair, it would signify my rebirth.

The day we shaved my hair, I was petrified. My mom and my brother came over, I took a tranquiliser, sat down and we did a live online video. We cut my hair shoulder-length, then into a mohawk, and then we started to shave it. I felt so liberated afterwards. It was as if I had conquered my biggest fear. I had lost my breasts and shaved my hair – I could take on anything!

After chemo, we were in the midst of a national lockdown, and I missed singing so much. Then I saw a parody: *Don't Cry for me, Quarantina* ... I thought: 'I am just going to go on to my balcony

and sing. What better way to bring the community together?’ I put my speaker outside and I sat on my balcony just before the community came out on to their balconies at 8pm to clap for the medical careworkers – and I sang. It was amazing! I had only planned to sing one song, but they were cheering and clapping. We filmed it and posted it online, and the video reached people all over the world.

The second night was even more epic, so I continued doing a series of concerts throughout lockdown. I became known as the Sea Point Balcony Singer. I couldn’t believe the effect it had on the community. People from everywhere wrote to say that I had inspired them with what I was going through, and they even shared their stories. I realised how putting myself out there and sharing my vulnerability had created a powerful connection. It helped to not only facilitate my healing, but to bring healing to others.

The cancer treatment stripped me of so many of my most feminine aspects. I had always been this sexy singer, but there I was, stripped of everything. People could see the other side of me, without the façade. I was raw and real, and I bore my soul to the world. My relationship with my body changed completely. As a performer, I had been obsessed with my weight. I would count calories, and get depressed if I didn’t like the number I saw on the scale, but when cancer happened, I started to live in the present and not worry about those things. I started to love myself in a whole new way.

In total, I had four rounds of the Red Devil and then Taxol chemo, followed by radiation every day. A few weeks after that, I finally got new breasts, which was very exciting. I think that I had

been in survival mode for so long that I hadn't even allowed myself to grieve what had happened to me. Then one day, I went to see a friend, who is a trauma counsellor. I sat down on her couch and burst into tears. It was such a release. All of the adrenaline of the past year came out. I realised that I wanted my life back.

To anyone on this cancer journey, believe that you will get through it. We warriors have an inner strength, and we don't know how strong we are until strength is our only choice. Just take it one day at a time. Some days you are going to feel terrible, but tomorrow you are going to feel a bit better. Set milestones for yourself, and bring yourself a little joy where you can.

We are breast cancer warriors. There is a community of women who want to support each other along this journey, so reach out to us. It is my greatest gift and honour to help another woman on this journey. I believe I have been through this for a reason, and if I can just help another, that is what it is all about.



J A D E

My story is one of love, perseverance
and overcoming. For me, it's also
about faith and relying on people.
If you find yourself with a cancer
diagnosis, let people in. You can't face
impossible things alone.

I have always been in tune with my body, so when I found a lump in my breast, I knew there was something wrong. I was 26 or 27 at the time and working three roles in my job, helping my husband with our new business, and looking after my two children: A one-year-old, and a baby of a few months old. I was working late nights and doing everything that needed to be done to make my husband's business dream happen.

I found the lump while doing a self-examination in the bath. It was pea-sized, and I could move it around. I thought that it could be hormone-related and normal, so I waited two weeks, but 14 days later, it was still there. I knew there was something wrong, but I put off dealing with it and went on with my busy life.

Around May, I told my husband about it, and he insisted that I go see a doctor, who referred me to a clinic for a biopsy. I put that off for another few weeks, until my husband once again insisted that I go.

At the clinic, they did a full battery of tests. The results should have come back the same day, so when they told me that they were going to phone me with the results, I got a little worried. When they called, they told me that I had grade 3 cancer, which is extremely aggressive.

At first, I was quite stunned, but then the sadness hit. I went straight home to tell my husband. With his amazing optimism, he

immediately began to research my diagnosis to find a way to tackle it. I had two small children who needed me, so I had to find the energy to fight.

The proposed treatment plan was quite radical: A double mastectomy, with a reconstruction starting on that day. I had to do chemotherapy and radiation – it was my best shot at living a long, normal life. I went on a clean diet and did everything I could to survive. Then I started the hormone treatment, which blocked my oestrogen.

A few days before I was scheduled to go into surgery to have the cancer removed, I had this weird, familiar feeling. It was a Friday, and I was scheduled to have the operation the following week. I thought: ‘No, I can’t be pregnant.’ I had been on the pill and taking a hormone-suppressing pill, but I bought a home pregnancy test, just to be sure. It was positive – I was pregnant.

I waited in silence for my husband to come home. When I saw him come through the door, I burst into tears. When he heard the news, he said: ‘Oh, that’s wonderful.’ But I was faced with a decision: I was already fighting for life and to be with my children, but I might need to terminate that child in order to keep alive for my living children. I was so torn up.

On the Monday, I disclosed everything to my doctors. I understood the risk: I had a hormone-sensitive cancer, and by being pregnant, I was accelerating the cancer in my body. I took the decision to terminate the pregnancy and to continue with my treatment plan. I signed the papers, and it was added to the list of surgeries that were going to take place the following day. My husband was very upset that I had made the decision on my own.

The following day, I was scheduled to have a double mastectomy, the auxiliary clearance, reconstruction and the termination of the pregnancy. They rolled me into theatre last, where they told me that they would only be able to remove the cancer on that occasion as they were pressed for time. I woke up the next day and still had my right breast – they had only had time to remove one, and the termination had not happened. They gave me a date, six days later, to visit the termination clinic.

I left the hospital feeling so guilty. I felt like I was torturing the little person inside of me – my person. When it was time for the termination, my husband told me that he couldn't go with me – he couldn't be a part of it. When I got to the clinic, I was carrying this immense heaviness. I just started to pray and asked God for a sign: 'Please let there be no heartbeat. Give me something to help me understand and accept that I've made the right decision.'

I had to have a dating scan first. Usually, they don't talk to you during the scan and the screens are turned away, to protect your emotional state, but the woman asked me: 'Do you want to know anything about this pregnancy?' I was taken aback. I said: 'Yes, of course,' and then everything about my predicament and condition came pouring out. She turned the screens towards me and there were two heartbeats. They looked perfectly fine. That was my sign. The woman called the head of department, and they put together a plan to follow the babies' development. The termination was put off until week 28.

The treatment plan then had to change, and I had to undergo psychiatric evaluations. I had a hormone-sensitive, grade 3 cancer, and I was producing double the amount of pregnancy hormones.

The cancer was going to spread, but I had to fight for my twins. At 14 weeks into my pregnancy, I started chemotherapy. Eight sessions were planned, but after six, I gave birth to healthy twin girls. My last chemo was in January, and I was able to breastfeed them with my one remaining breast.

Everything worked out for them – and for me. I went in there fighting for my life, and I came out with so much more life. My husband was such an integral part of my fight. He supported me in every way to make sure that the girls and me made it through. Looking back, I honestly don't know how I did it. A desire to protect and live for my children kicked in. For nine months, we lived with the uncertainty of whether I was going to make it, or the twins were going to die.

A year or so later, my cancer came back. Because I was breastfeeding, I hadn't been diligent with my medication. It had spread to my bones and possibly my liver. A CT scan showed some specks in other places, too. I radically changed my diet, applied my faith and adopted some other holistic methods. By the time I had my second scan, they couldn't find the other specks that had been visible on the first scan. It remained localised in the lymph nodes. I had surgery to remove them, and I did radiation for the first time. Then I had chemo for a second time, and had the other breast removed. I didn't opt for a reconstruction.

A few months ago, I received the all-clear. I am in remission, but I will be on hormone therapy for 10 years.

My own journey has taught me to be self-aware. As women, we are so busy, but it's so important to take moments to ask ourselves if we are okay. We need to be in touch with our selves, emotionally,

mentally, physically and spiritually. To overcome hardship and trials, you also need the right mindset. You need to say: 'I am capable, I am going to do this,' or 'I am going to attempt to do this.' Even the 'trying' produces results. Our decisions create our journey and make us who we are.

My story is one of love, perseverance and overcoming. For me, it is also about faith and relying on people. If you find yourself with a cancer diagnosis, let people in. You can't face impossible things alone. You don't know how powerful you are until you're faced with the impossible. Today is the debut of the more powerful you, and she is stunning and so fierce. You are capable, and powerful, so lean into that. You'll surprise yourself..

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