

bloom

Reach to Recovery International (RRI)

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COVER ART:
"Overjoyed" From the series
"Message of Hope"
Gouache painting by Shirley Bianca.

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Reach to Recovery International (RRI) is a global non-profit headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. RRI is committed to improving the quality of life of individuals affected by breast cancer and their families.

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Our mission

Reach to Recovery International's mission is to:

- Unite organisations throughout the world which support individuals affected by breast cancer, including their families, in order to share ideas and best practices;
- Disseminate valuable information to support individuals affected by breast cancer throughout the world via bi-annual conferences, our website, our e-newsletter, and other forms of worldwide communications; and
- Assist our Member Organisations in achieving their goals of:
 - Improving the quality of life of individuals affected by breast cancer,
 - Providing psychosocial support to individuals affected by breast cancer, either through group meetings or activities or one-on-one peer support provided by carefully trained survivor volunteers,
 - Advocating on behalf of individuals affected by breast cancer,
 - Providing patient navigation to individuals affected by breast cancer.

What would you like to read about in the next edition of *bloom*?

Email your theme suggestions to info@reachtorecoveryinternational.org. A theme will be chosen by February 2025. Regardless of whether your suggested theme is chosen this time, it will remain under consideration for future editions.



SUBMIT YOUR ARTICLE

bloom

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Celebrate the work being done by your organisation's volunteers!

Do your organisation's volunteers do outstanding work to support those touched by breast cancer in your community? Bloom wants to hear all about it! Send us articles about the projects your volunteers are working on, and be sure to include high resolution photos. Articles should be 200 - 400 words long and should be sent in Word format to info@reachtorecoveryinternational.org. It's a great way to thank your volunteers for a job well done, and to raise awareness about your organisation!

Upcoming events:

World Cancer Day

4 February 2025

worldcancerday.org

National Survivorship Conference

6-7 March 2025 / Melbourne, Australia

<https://www.cancersurvivorshipconference.org.au>

ABC8 (Eighth International Consensus Conference)

6-8 November 2025 / Lisbon, Portugal

<https://www.mbcalliance.org/event/european-breast-cancer-conference-2/>

World Cancer Leader's Summit

18-20 November 2025 / Melbourne, Australia

<https://www.uicc.org/what-we-do/events/world-cancer-leaders-summit/world-cancer-leaders-summit-2025>

Message from the ABC Global Alliance

In 2015, the ABC Global Alliance published the Global Decade Report, which led to the development of the ABC Global Charter. The ABC Global Charter outlined 10 actions to drive change in the care of people with advanced breast cancer over the current decade. In 2025 the ABC Global Charter will be updated for the decade 2025-2035.

To measure progress against each of the charter goals we have launched two surveys to understand the experiences of patients living with advanced breast cancer and the healthcare professionals that care for them worldwide.

If you are a patient living with advanced breast cancer or a healthcare professional who cares for people with advanced breast cancer, we want to hear from you. Your experiences matter, so please help us by completing one of our 15-minute surveys today, so we can take steps to improve care for people with advanced breast cancer in the future.

The surveys take just 15 minutes to complete, and the patient survey is available in 8 languages. Click the [link](#) or scan the QR code to take part. The surveys will be open until 31st July. event will be held in your time zone.





The deadline for applications to qualify to bid to host the next Reach to Recovery International Breast Cancer Support Conference is 28 February 2025!

Learn! Share! Collaborate! Interested in hosting a **Reach to Recovery International Breast Cancer Support Conference**? The next RRI Breast Cancer Support Conference will be held in 2026, and RRI will accept applications to qualify to bid to host the conference until 28 February 2025!

Face-to-face RRI Conferences bring a vast global community together – women and men personally affected by breast cancer, including patients, caregivers, doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, advocates, volunteers, and many more.

The benefits for organisations and communities are many! RRI Conferences promote networking, awareness and advocacy, volunteerism, capacity building, and even tourism, and they foster international friendships that last a lifetime.

If your breast cancer support organisation is interested in hosting a Conference, please [click here](#) for more information.



Email: info@reachtorecoveryinternational.org



Message from Leonie Young

– President of RRI

“

WE WANT YOU TO KNOW HOW IMPORTANT YOUR FRIENDSHIP AND CONNECTION IS TO THE RRI COMMUNITY, AND WE THANK YOU FOR ALL YOU DO TO SUPPORT THOSE AFFECTED BY BREAST CANCER.

”

In keeping with our final online event for 2024 held on Saturday 23 November, the focus of this edition of Bloom is *Finding hope and building resilience following a breast cancer diagnosis*.

Along with very valuable information from our friends and members who are clinical specialists, we have submissions from patients and survivors who share their stories of sadness and despair that turned into stories of hope and resilience. Their stories are examples of how people just like you and me found ways to work through and overcome challenges they first thought were insurmountable. I especially want to thank all who unselfishly shared these accounts of their lives because they knew from their own experiences that, no matter how difficult life can get, there are solutions. Others who have walked the same path are there to guide and support you—you are not alone.

We never tire of receiving submissions from our members around the world. We hope you enjoy reading about their achievements in the *Spotlight on our members* section. There is always so much happening, especially during October Breast Cancer Awareness month.

The online event on Saturday 23 November started with a presentation by Professor Haryana Dhillon, a behavioural scientist at the University of Sydney in Australia working with people who are living with cancer or working through cancer survivorship. This was followed by presentations by Petrina Burnett from Perth, Australia and Stephné Jacobs from Pretoria, South Africa who shared their experiences and insights following their personal breast cancer diagnoses. If you were unable to attend the session or would like to see it again, a recording is now available at <https://cattendee.abstractsonline.com/meeting/20852/meeting-info>. Just visit that site and click on the link that says “23 November 2024 Session” toward the top left of the page.

Not all voices are able to be heard as well as others and we can help each other by joining our collective voices to bring equity of access to support and services and equality for all. Please share Bloom and other information about RRI with your friends and colleagues and encourage them to join with RRI as we strive to broaden our reach and strengthen our RRI community. If anyone would like more information, they can contact us at info@reachtorecoveryinternational.org

We want you to know how important your friendship and connection is to the RRI community, and we thank you for all you do to support those affected by breast cancer. Have a wonderful break, whatever and however you celebrate this time of year, and we look forward to connecting with you again in 2025.

A guide for developing resilience

Maggie Watson B.Sc. PhD. DipClinPsych, Registered Clinical Psychologist specialising in Psycho-oncology and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Research Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology, University College London, UK



Maggie Watson

What is Resilience?

The word resilience is often used when people talk about the ability to cope well with cancer. But what does it mean? The Oxford Dictionary defines resilience as “readily recovering from shock or distress”. Yet this doesn’t answer the question of how to “readily recover”. Emotional ups and downs are a *normal* part of going through cancer, its treatment, and longer-term recovery. However, we’re not necessarily born with a capacity for resilience; we usually learn it. Hopefully, the ideas shared here will be helpful in clarifying how to develop resilience when coping with cancer.

Building Resilience: The 3-step plan

There are 3 steps you can take towards becoming more resilient.

Step 1. Challenge Negative thoughts

You may have realised that the way you *think* about problems also affects the way you feel and what you *do*. Negative thoughts make you feel more anxious and unhappy and less likely to try to tackle a problem. They can make you feel helpless. However, you can learn how to become more aware of your negative thoughts by doing the following:

- Learn to recognise those thoughts that make you feel low, worried, or helpless
- Keep track of when they happen
- Consider how unrealistic or unhelpful they are to you

For a *more balanced* way of thinking ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I assuming I can do nothing to change my situation?
- Am I worrying about things that may not happen?
- What’s the evidence for what I’m thinking?
- Am I being overly negative?
- Is there an alternative viewpoint?

Step 2. Challenge Negative thoughts

Think back to any previous occasions in your life when you had to cope with challenging problems. What did you do to cope? What strategies helped you get on with your life despite the problems? Do you have any ideas why these strategies worked so well?

List what has been helpful.

It’s important to have specific aims and targets when embarking on change so you can begin to consider how to make use of those strengths you’ve identified from your previous experiences. For example, you might want to control feelings of worry and be more relaxed. Or you might want to be able to face certain situations and deal with them more effectively. Decide what you want as your specific aims.

Step 3. Planning where to start

(Identifying and prioritising targets for change)

Targets for Change

List the problems you face.

If you are finding it difficult to identify targets for change, take a little time to consider the following:

- What’s stopping you from setting targets for change?
- Do you need to talk about your feelings before you do anything else?

Remember that it’s better to prioritise by starting with the problems most easily resolved because this builds up your confidence. As you get better at tackling simpler things, you can move to the more complex things later. In Cognitive Behavioural Therapy we usually call this *graded goal setting*.

Now that you’ve decided what changes to make, the key to putting these activities into practice is to *plan* by building on those past strengths and making changes to your routines so that you gradually tackle the problems. Keeping busy may also be a good part of

your changed routines. Having a structure to your day can be very motivating if you find it hard to put your good intentioned plans into action. Keeping a weekly diary often helps. A patient guide describing how to cope with cancer is available from the author¹.

In Summary

So, in answer to the question “*what makes someone resilient?*”, it could be argued that, despite the emotional ups and downs, resilient people make time to (1) consider what they are thinking and how that is affecting them, (2) determine what they can do to solve the problems, then (3) plan and work out some solutions.

However, although the resilient person gives themselves some time to think about what they want and how to get it, importantly, they also connect with others to share feelings and be part of their social network. Sharing your ideas with others is good. Many of you reading the Bloom magazine will know the value of friends, family and social connections with others in the same boat. Just another part of being resilient.

REFERENCES:

¹ Coping With Cancer. A Patient Guide. If you’d like a copy, email the author at maggie.watson@live.co.uk.

A path to physical and emotional rehabilitation and healing after a breast cancer diagnosis

Linda Estele Greeff, *Oncology and Palliative Care Social Worker*
South Africa



Linda Estele Greeff

A breast cancer diagnosis is a life-altering event, often accompanied by a whirlwind of emotions ranging from fear and uncertainty to anger and sadness. The journey through treatment and recovery is challenging, demanding both physical and emotional strength. However, amidst the struggle, many individuals find hope, build resilience, and discover new meanings in their lives. This article explores the importance of physical and emotional rehabilitation, the role of hope, and the process of meaning-making in the journey of overcoming breast cancer.

The Initial Shock and Emotional Impact

When diagnosed with breast cancer, the initial reaction is often shock and disbelief. It's a moment that changes everything. Questions about survival, the impact on loved ones, and the future can flood the mind. The emotional toll can be overwhelming, with feelings of fear, anxiety, and grief becoming constant companions.

At this critical juncture, it is essential to acknowledge and validate these emotions. Allowing oneself to feel and process the pain is the first step toward emotional rehabilitation. Denying or suppressing these feelings can lead to prolonged distress and hinder the healing process. Support from family, friends, or professional counsellors can provide a safe space for expressing these emotions, helping individuals begin the journey of healing.

Physical Rehabilitation: Regaining Strength and Vitality

Breast cancer treatment often involves a combination of surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and hormone therapy. Each of these treatments has its own set of physical challenges, from fatigue and pain to changes in body image. Physical rehabilitation is a crucial component of recovery, helping individuals regain strength, improve mobility, and enhance overall well-being.

1. Exercise and Physical Therapy: Regular physical activity, tailored to an individual's needs and abilities, is one of the most effective ways to combat the physical side effects of cancer treatment. Exercise helps reduce fatigue, improve cardiovascular health, and strengthen muscles. It also plays a significant role in improving mental health by reducing anxiety and depression. Physical therapy can also be vital, especially for those who have undergone surgery.

Therapists can guide patients through exercises that improve range of motion, reduce lymphedema risk, and address post-operative pain. Programs designed specifically for breast cancer survivors, such as yoga or Pilates, can also be beneficial, offering gentle yet effective ways to build strength and flexibility.

2. Nutrition and Diet: Proper nutrition plays a critical role in physical rehabilitation. A balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains provides the body with the nutrients it needs to heal and regain energy. Certain foods and supplements may also help manage side effects like nausea or loss of appetite during treatment.

Working with a dietitian or nutritionist who specializes in cancer care can help individuals create a personalized eating plan that supports their recovery and overall health. Staying hydrated and maintaining a healthy weight are also important aspects of physical well-being.

Emotional Rehabilitation: Building Resilience and Coping Skills

The emotional journey after a breast cancer diagnosis is just as important as the physical one. Building resilience and finding ways to cope with the emotional upheaval are crucial for long-term recovery and quality of life.

1. Seeking Support: One of the most effective ways to build emotional resilience is through support networks. This can include family and friends, support groups, or professional counselling. Connecting with others who have gone through similar experiences can provide comfort and reduce feelings of isolation. This is especially important after active treatment stops and life has to return to a new normal. This can be extremely challenging and survivors

struggle with fear, anxiety and depression as they navigate this new phase in their life after life has radically changed forever. The sword of possible recurrence is ever-present and adjusting to this could be very hard and challenging.

Support groups, both in-person and online, offer a space where individuals can share their fears, successes, and coping strategies. Professional counsellors or therapists can also help individuals develop coping mechanisms and navigate the emotional challenges of cancer treatment. Make time to unpack your emotions and new reality. You owe it to yourself after the trauma of a cancer diagnosis and treatment experience. Authentic living is of the utmost importance, as is being mindful of the damage that toxic positivity can have on your emotional well-being.

2. Mindfulness and Stress Management:

Mindfulness practices, such as meditation, deep breathing exercises, and journaling, can significantly reduce stress and promote emotional healing. These practices help individuals stay present, manage anxiety, and cultivate a sense of calm amidst the turmoil.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)

is another effective tool for managing the emotional impact of a breast cancer diagnosis. CBT helps individuals reframe negative thoughts and develop healthier ways of thinking, which can lead to improved emotional resilience and a more positive outlook on life.

Finding Hope: The Foundation of Resilience Hope is a powerful force that can sustain individuals through the darkest times. It is the belief that, despite the challenges, there is light at the end of the tunnel. For many, finding hope after a breast cancer

diagnosis involves redefining what hope means to them.

1. Setting Realistic Goals: One way to cultivate hope is by setting realistic, achievable goals. These goals can be related to physical recovery, such as increasing physical activity or improving nutrition, or they can be emotional, such as reconnecting with loved ones or finding joy in everyday activities. Achieving these goals, no matter how small, can boost confidence and reinforce the belief that recovery is possible.

2. Focusing on the Present: Hope often involves focusing on the present moment rather than dwelling on the uncertainties of the future. Mindfulness practices can help individuals stay grounded in the here and now, appreciating the small victories and moments of joy that occur along the way. Hope should become a verb, such that you “do hope” when you voice deep sadness, when you actively seek support, when you eat healthily and increase your daily exercise routine, when you actively plan for joy and meaning, and when you create practices like working on a personal legacy project for your own and your family’s benefit. This will provide a spring board for creative problem-solving and *learning to live until you die and not die while you are living!*

3. Spirituality and Meaning-Making: For some, hope is deeply intertwined with spirituality. Engaging in spiritual practices, whether through religion, meditation, or connection with nature, can provide a sense of purpose and peace. Meaning-making, or the process of finding significance in the cancer experience, is another way to cultivate hope. This might involve reflecting on how the experience has changed one’s perspective on life, relationships, or personal values.

Encouraging Meaning-Making: Turning Adversity into Growth
Meaning-making is the process of finding purpose and significance in the face of adversity. For breast cancer survivors, this often involves reflecting on how the

experience has reshaped their lives, relationships, and sense of self.

1. Personal Growth: Many individuals report experiencing personal growth after a breast cancer diagnosis. This growth can take many forms, such as a deeper appreciation for life, strengthened relationships, or a newfound sense of resilience. Engaging in activities that promote personal growth, such as volunteering, pursuing new hobbies, or continuing education can further enhance this sense of meaning.

2. Sharing the Journey: For some, meaning-making involves sharing their experiences with others. This might involve writing a blog, speaking at support groups, or mentoring newly diagnosed individuals. By helping others, survivors can turn their experiences into a source of strength and hope for themselves and others.

3. Legacy Building: Finally, some individuals find meaning in creating a legacy that extends beyond their own lives. This could involve starting a charity, raising awareness about breast cancer, or simply living a life that reflects their values and beliefs. Legacy building allows individuals to feel that their experiences have had a positive impact on the world.

Conclusion

Finding hope and building resilience after a breast cancer diagnosis is a journey that encompasses both physical and emotional rehabilitation. By focusing on regaining physical strength, developing emotional resilience, and engaging in meaning-making, individuals can emerge from the experience not just as survivors but as stronger, more empowered versions of themselves. Hope is the cornerstone of this journey, providing the strength to face challenges and the belief that recovery is possible. Through this process, individuals can find new meaning in their lives, transforming adversity into a source of growth and inspiration.

RECOMMENDED READING LIST:

To support your journey of finding hope, building resilience, and making meaning after a breast cancer diagnosis, here is a list of recommended readings:

“The Cancer Survivor’s Companion: Practical Ways to Cope with Your Feelings After Cancer” by Dr. Frances Goodhart and Lucy Atkins

“Anticancer: A New Way of Life” by David Servan-Schreiber, MD, PhD. This book offers practical advice and emotional support for coping with the feelings and challenges that arise after a cancer diagnosis.

“Breast Cancer: 50 Essential Things You Can Do” by Greg Anderson. Written by a physician and cancer survivor, this book explores the relationship between lifestyle and cancer, offering guidance on how to make positive changes that support healing and prevention.

“Radical Remission: Surviving Cancer Against All Odds” by Kelly A. Turner, PhD. This book provides practical advice on coping with a breast cancer diagnosis, from understanding treatment options to managing emotions and improving overall well-being. Turner explores the stories of individuals who have experienced unexpected recoveries from cancer, offering insights into the common factors that may contribute to these radical remissions.

“When Breath Becomes Air” by Paul Kalanithi. This memoir by a neurosurgeon facing terminal cancer offers profound reflections on life, death, and the search for meaning in the face of mortality.

“The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma” by Bessel van der Kolk, MD. While not specifically about cancer, this book provides valuable insights into the ways trauma affects the body and mind, offering tools for healing and recovery.

“Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief” by David Kessler. Kessler, a renowned grief expert, explores the concept of finding meaning in the wake of loss, offering guidance for those seeking to make sense of their experiences.

Lessons learned by an oncology social worker who survived breast cancer

Mariana Lourens, Head of Social Work Department, CancerCare South Africa



Mariana Lourens

This December, it will be 20 years since my breast cancer diagnosis at age 42. What an amazing journey! The saying that everything in life has a negative as well as a positive side is true; it depends mostly on how the individual chooses to react towards it. My cancer diagnosis came as a complete shock. Our children were young, our daughters aged 16 and 14 respectively and our son just having turned 10. I did not have any of the usual risk factors. I was young, had no family history of cancer, breastfed all three children, was not overweight, neither smoked nor drank, and was active and fairly fit.

Once we detected the lump, we immediately sought medical help. I was diagnosed with lobular carcinoma and, because I have small breasts and the lump was close to the rib cage, we decided on a mastectomy, followed by radiation and five years of tamoxifen. After finishing my radiation treatment in 2005, I joined the oncology practice where I was treated and today I am still working in the same practice as an oncology social worker.

A cancer diagnosis can so easily engulf the patient as well as the family, similarly to a huge tidal wave. People often do not see the wave coming or do not realize its power. Fear of the unknown can consume our thoughts, it feels as if cancer invades everything, whether you sleep, eat, breathe, spend time with loved ones, or work. It is only once you realize it is a choice to allow this to continue, or to see the cancer diagnosis as only part of who you are that you can start regaining control.

- An essential part of regaining control is to obtain the correct factual information from your oncology team and to make sure you understand what the oncologist is explaining. Often we are too scared or proud to say that we do not understand the medical jargon. If you have a question, it is important to ask it. Remember, the oncologist/medical team is the “supplier of a service”, the patient is the “consumer.”

Similarly, if you buy a new product and you don't understand how it operates, you easily go back to the supplier and ask for guidance. Same thing! Take control and ask!

- You may not wish to share everything with everyone, but it will help to share a little information about the diagnosis with your loved ones. Parents often want to protect children by not sharing. Remember that children listen when you whisper, although when you raise your voice, they are often stone deaf! I often see couples in counselling who decide not to tell the children, and as we discuss what is happening at home, they automatically identify behaviour changes in the children, indicating that they know something. That “self-interpreted something” can be much more harmful than the facts shared on a level the child will understand. Our children need to know their parents will not lie to them and that they can discuss their concerns with them.

- It is important to remember that cancer treatment is person- and cancer-specific. The drugs and dosages for your neighbour or your Facebook friend is no blueprint for how your own treatment plan will look. Similarly, side effects are also not the same because our bodies differ. Make sure you discuss any side effects with your treatment team. They cannot address issues if they do not know about them.

- Find somebody you can confide in and share your concerns and worries. Ideally, it will be your partner, husband, or wife. Remember that the people close to you also suffer. While all the focus is on the patient, the family often sit with paralyzing concerns. Be honest with each other. Too often we try to be strong, which is counter-productive. To be sad, fearful, and anxious, does not mean giving up. It just means we are human.

- The loss of a breast and treatment for breast cancer have an impact on our

emotions and hormonal balance. Your partner's reaction influences your healing. If they are comfortable with your changed body and regard you as more than the cancer, it supports your healing. But you need to be open to accepting this as well.

- Breast cancer and its treatment often impact intimacy in the relationship. Talk about it. Share fears and feelings. Allow your partner to touch you and comfort you. Seek professional help, sooner than later.

Life looks and feels different when diagnosed with cancer. It changes a person's perception of time. Sometimes you have to ride the wave to reach the shore. Sometimes you have to swim and sometimes you need the help of others to get you to the shore. When you reach the shore, you just have to lie on the sand for a while to get your breath back.

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A CANCER DIAGNOSIS CAN SO EASILY ENGLUF THE PATIENT AS WELL AS THE FAMILY, SIMILARLY TO A HUGE TIDAL WAVE. PEOPLE OFTEN DO NOT SEE THE WAVE COMING OR DO NOT REALIZE ITS POWER.

”

Advice from an oncology counselor with a lived experience of breast cancer

Nadia Booysen, *Oncology Counselor at De Muelenaere Oncology Centre, South Africa*



Nadia Booysen

Hope often forms part of our lives long before we enter the world of cancer. It almost gives us assurance that the odds of a positive outcome might be more probable than what is realistic. But when it comes to the world of cancer, it takes on a whole new dimension.

Hope forms an integral part of everyone's cancer experience, regardless of what is portrayed and irrespective of how nonchalant someone might appear. The most obvious reason for this is the fact that we are so powerless in so many ways throughout this journey. We opt for treatment and trust our doctor and have faith in our personal gods but, as individual patients, we can only hope. And when we respond well to treatment and move into the phase called "remission," what do we do? We hope some more.

From the time we are diagnosed we hope we get our health back with every fibre of our being, and we bargain for our lives with hopeful hearts and resilient minds. And, whilst hoping, we build resilience. These are the true centre pieces of our survival: hope and resilience.

Building resilience becomes second nature to us because, whilst hoping we can survive, we learn to build it. It is the only option we have at the end of the day. We need resilience when our minds run away with us between midnight and 2AM. We need resilience on the days when everyone tells us that we are so strong and we feel we will let them down if we are honest about our weaknesses. One helpful strategy for building resilience is to break the cancer experience down into manageable pieces, taking it day by day, hour by hour, and moment by moment.

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WE NEED RESILIENCE ON THE DAYS WHEN EVERYONE TELLS US THAT WE ARE SO STRONG AND WE FEEL WE WILL LET THEM DOWN IF WE ARE HONEST ABOUT OUR WEAKNESSES.

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Hope and resilience after a breast cancer diagnosis

Petrina Burnett
Australia



Petrina Burnett

It is never easy being diagnosed with cancer at any time, at any age, or in any country around the world. I count my blessings that I'm still here and that I can do the work that I do and live the life that I now live.

However, it hasn't always been easy. I was diagnosed with Stage 3 or locally advanced triple-negative breast cancer in early 2007. I found a lump in my armpit not long after turning 31. After surgery, I completed a course of dose dense chemotherapy in conjunction with a hormone blocker called Zoladex®, prescribed in the hope of preserving fertility. This treatment was then followed by six weeks of radiotherapy. A year after my diagnosis, genetic testing confirmed that I carried a BRCA1 gene mutation which came as no surprise to my family.

I lived alone and was working as a physiotherapist. The year after treatment, I realised that recovery wasn't going to be a smooth or linear path forward. I had bilateral mastectomies and reconstructions and other big social and financial challenges to confront. I needed to change my expectations of recovery, how long it was going to take, and indeed what my life might ultimately look like. It was a period when I took two steps forward and one step back. After reconstructions there were post op complications and energy level struggles, so I savoured the delightful moments of life and tried to see the big

picture improvements amongst the ups and downs day by day.

To bring more positivity into the mix, I engaged in further physiotherapy study and spent more time outdoors, swimming and walking my dog. I also tried to get a good night's sleep, because waking in the morning feeling refreshed helped my resilience factor monumentally.

I'd endeavour to go out with friends even when I didn't feel like it, because they helped me to get away from the poor health vibe, were fun, and would distract me mentally. I also connected with uplifting people, who were open to listening to debriefs and righting the world's wrongs from time to time! I looked at others around me who were the definition of resilience. They didn't sweat the small stuff. Often something easier said than done!

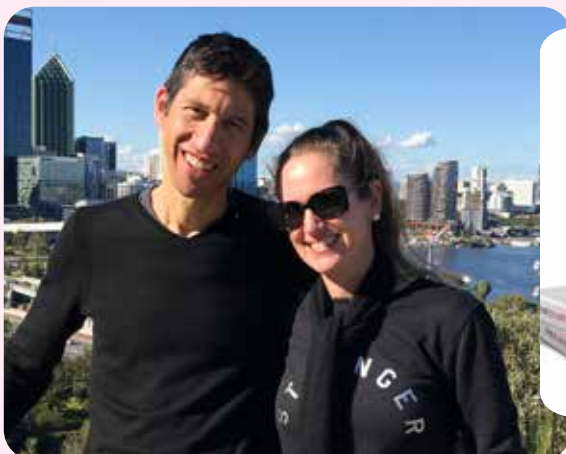
Five years after my diagnosis, just as my work and energy were back on track and mastectomies and reconstructions out of the way, there was another large knock. I discovered I was infertile and that virtually every option around it was exhausted or at the least incredibly difficult. My ovaries were "failing" so the time had come to

have them out and confront surgical premature menopause. My cousin (31) had also just been diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer. I supported her and attended her appointments which was hard and quite traumatic.

Resilience-wise, I was feeling emotionally fatigued at this time, so I had to dig further and deeper. I cocooned myself from the world when I needed to - it was survival mode, not thriving mode, and that was ok. I sought help and went to an amazing counsellor. My sessions with her were profoundly helpful and opened the door to thinking differently and looking at things from other perspectives. I also focused on my passions, including my work providing care to others. Helping others has also helped me monumentally. We are not alone in our grief, hopes, and losses. Connecting to others is important and we can make a difference.

Now, just shy of 18 years post diagnosis, I'm married to a wonderful man and am very grateful for the life I now have. As stated by the non-profit foundation My Faulty Gene "You've got to look for the good in the bad, the happy in the sad, the gain in the pain, and what makes you feel grateful and not hateful." Happy, gainful and grateful, sum up my experience well.

If you would like to hear more about Petrina's story, she has published her book "It's Not (Just) About the Breast". It is available on Amazon, Kindle Store (e-book) and for Australians online at wellstrongcourage.com



Building resilience through volunteering: how Reach For Recovery empowers survivors

Stephné Jacobs, Chairperson, Reach for Recovery South Africa



Stephné Jacobs

The lotus flower's journey from muddy waters to a vibrant bloom is a powerful symbol of resilience. It reminds us that, even in adversity, we can rise and flourish. This truth guided me during my battle with cancer. At 43, breast cancer shattered me but, within the despair, I found a determination to transform my pain into something beautiful — much like the lotus turns mud into its foundation. While inner strength was vital, the connections I built through volunteering with Reach for Recovery (RFR) became equally crucial in my healing.

Joining the RFR community opened my eyes to the importance of relationships in fostering resilience. Support group meetings and volunteer opportunities created a sense of belonging that helped shape my recovery. At my first support meeting, I felt the weight of solitude lift as I was welcomed into a community of shared experiences. This connection reshaped my outlook and reinforced my belief that overcoming challenges is possible when we stand together.

A key turning point for me was sharing my story publicly. Supported by new friendships and collective encouragement, I discovered strengths I didn't know I had. RFR's mission of peer support was at the heart of my journey, allowing me to connect with others who understood my challenges. For 57 years, RFR volunteers in South Africa have impacted individuals and, in the last decade, 47,000 individuals facing breast cancer received comfort, empathy, and strength. This community is a vital resource for women navigating their challenging journeys.

Imagine being a patient in a hospital, after breast cancer surgery, and then receiving a visit from a volunteer who's been through it themselves. This beacon of hope reinforces the belief: "If they can do it, so can I." Over the past year, 225 volunteers across 20 locations have supported 6,300 patients in hospital settings, endorsed by 132 medical institutions and 182 specialists. This volunteer network illustrates how resilience is not just a concept but a tangible reality born from shared experiences.

Cancer challenges more than physical health — it impacts a woman's sense of

femininity and self-worth. Organisations like RFR and SAMFA (SA Mushroom Farmers Association) work together as a pillar of support, offering resources like the Ditto Project which provides free custom-made breast prosthetics to over 8,000 survivors. This helps women regain their confidence and embrace life after breast cancer.

Resilience isn't a fixed trait but a dynamic process that can be nurtured, especially through peer support. Survivors often face emotional and psychological challenges long after treatment ends, making ongoing support essential. RFR plays a vital role in fostering resilience by providing resources that encourage introspection, hope, and personal fulfilment. Their initiatives, including a virtual picnic and online creative activities like glass painting, create opportunities for survivors to connect and bond while celebrating their individuality. The "In Other Women's Words" writing group was another powerful initiative, allowing participants to share personal stories of survival and leading to the creation of a pamphlet of creative works that helped others process their own experiences. Volunteering with RFR fosters a sense of purpose and nurtures personal growth, as evidenced by volunteer awards and celebratory events that symbolise hope and perseverance.

RFR is dedicated to empowering individuals to take control of their health journeys. By providing knowledge to make informed care decisions, the organisation fosters self-advocacy and ownership of recovery. Through their platform, they share vital information on topics like radiotherapy, reconstruction, vascular disease, and

the challenges faced by young women. They also provide strategies for managing dietary concerns and coping with lymphoedema, ensuring survivors feel supported long after treatment ends.

As a volunteer, I've had the privilege of helping others navigate the complexities of breast cancer recovery, from peer support to education. Over the past four years, we've trained 140 women in South Africa and reached participants across seven African nations, including Eswatini, Zimbabwe, and Uganda. Despite each country's unique challenges, we've empowered each other to create positive change and build a supportive community across borders.

RFR's impact is felt not only in the lives of individual survivors but also in the larger South African community. This October, we conducted 222 awareness drives, each one a testament to the resilience and growth of our network. As we reflect on our journey, we recognise that "from our struggles, our true selves blossom." Together, we continue to grow, thrive, and empower others to do the same.

From grief and despair to acceptance and healing

Rama Sivaram, Consultant, KEM Hospital Research Centre; Nag Foundation; Faculty, Sanjeevani – Life Beyond Cancer, India



Rama Sivaram

Almost a decade and a half back, Bharti was sent to me by the oncologists who was treating her. She was a wreck. She had mild lymphoedema, post mastectomy pain, and severe depression. She told me: “I don’t want to live! Why should I live when my 16-year old son is dead? I have failed my son.”

Bharti, then in her late 30s with stage 3 breast cancer, was still mourning her son who had passed away from brain cancer a few years earlier. She hated herself for living after her son died. Guilt, stigma, suicidal ideation, isolation, and the unfairness of it all combined with poor finances and a powerful belief in karma (the idea that a person's actions have consequences and that these consequences can affect a person's current and future lives), led to self-neglect and negativity. She was failing to comply with her treatment protocol and adhere to hormone therapy and follow-up care. In short Bharti came to me broken.

We endured four sessions of monosyllabic responses, the longest sentences being “I want to die. Why am I alive and my son dead?” In the fifth session, I referred Bharti to a psychiatrist and asked her to come back and see me afterward. I explained, “How can I help you when you don’t want to help yourself? You will be preventing your husband and daughter from healing by dragging them down with you. There is a choice beyond death and depression and that is resilience. You have to make the choice.”

Bharti left and did not come back to me for four months. She explained, “I was angry with you at first. I felt you did not support me and stopped my sessions. You made me feel self-centred, that I was grieving more for myself than my son.”

While grieving is coping mechanism when we suffer a loss and it is important to grieve, the grief frequently lessens within six months to a year. However, some people go through prolonged grief after bereavement which persists and becomes pervasive. Bharti could not move on from her grief due to her learnt and misplaced beliefs. After she returned to me, we

worked on this together to help her build resilience and accept her loss and her new “normal”. When dealing with anyone in their angst, I adopt an eclectic or varied and loose approach. Her mood and her feelings guided the sessions. We worked on aspects and issues that emerged at that moment and devised strategies to deal with them. While the loss of her son will be life long, Bharti’s grief did eventually lessen with time and with hard work during our sessions. She finally chose to see herself as a survivor rather than a victim.

What is Resilience? The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as the process of adapting to challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.

Most of us who have dealt with breast cancer by itself or with added adversities naturally go through the ups and downs of hope and despair. However, when despair exceeds hope and the basic instinct to survive and get well, we need help to realise that, despite our personal tragedies, every life is beautiful and precious and an entity we need to nurture with love and self-care. To do this we need to build resilience to face and overcome threats, fear and life changing situations.

How does one build resilience - where to begin? There are steps which we need to take to build resilience.

1. Begin with self-awareness. Look within ourselves, from childhood to present. We’ll surely find good and not-so-good things about our selves, our beliefs, the events and milestones in our lives, and how they affected our emotions and behaviour. Make a list of them. Highlight

the ones that are the barriers/triggers to our well-being. Self-awareness can guide us to learn better self-control, where we are not overwhelmed and we seek better problem-solving skills and social support. Become self-aware.

2. Know the barriers/triggers. These are internal and external stressors that stem from a variety of our experiences such as the way we were brought up. They cause us to perceive certain situations, people, and circumstances (like illness or pain) as threats that cause anxiety and stress. They could be psychological or social – all are intertwined. Being aware of our triggers prepares us to deal with them so we can be a survivor rather than a victim.

3. Self-acceptance and acceptance of our disease. Acceptance is an ongoing process that doesn't have a definitive beginning or end. It means realising the loss is our new reality and that life will go on. This also helps us to be more compassionate towards ourselves, which in turn tempers down any emotional



“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

*Building resilience is an important aspect of self-care, with an emphasis on the ability to bounce back from challenges and setbacks.

overload, self-shaming or guilt and enables us to be more proactive in the face of a challenge like a breast cancer diagnosis. After all, resilience is the key to our well-being. Accept the self, the disease, and the challenges.

4. Know that resilience is an ongoing, dynamic, and multi-dimensional process. We are not born with resilience. It's not instinctive; we need to cultivate it, knowing how we tend to react in certain situations. Building resilience is not a one-time process; it is flexible and continuous. Breast cancer is one adversity, but in a long life span there will be different adversities to face. Resilience is continuously building that inner strength in a realistic way to face and overcome the setbacks. It is personal, depending on the individual self, identity, life, and environment.

5. Positive or proactive actions to take. While reality and being realistic are important in taking on the challenges of cancer, it is just as important to be optimistic and cultivate positive emotions. All of us know when we feel down and victimized. We can let ourselves feel that pain, but we can't let it beat us and keep us down. Once the bargaining and grieving has lessened or ended, it is time to take on a fighting spirit and overcome.

• **Setting goals:** Building resilience is our goal so as to be prepared to face and adapt to challenges and changes. This

clarity of purpose helps us focus on those thoughts, words, and action that will support and stand by us in our difficult moments and encourage us to make healthy decisions and choices. Set a goal.

• **Make choices:** Depending on the type of person and situation, list out mindful and valued activities, those that are important, enjoyable, good, and beneficial at all times, and more so a release during stressful times. Every person has his or her valued activities, which are signs of their resilience.

• **Types of valued activities:** There are many valued activities that can help us build resilience, like exercise, journaling, reading, writing, meditation, yoga, music, dance, fine arts, connecting and communicating, and sharing and seeking help from friends and significant others, telling our stories, sharing our fears, sharing our successes in overcoming fears, phobias, and despair. Carrying on as usual, if possible, helps us feel normal and functional. There are also complementary therapies, support groups, and lifestyle choices like healthy eating, rest and restore time, and sleep and heal time, all of which are important for physical resilience. Don't forget silence. Simply being in silence and being with our own selves helps us discover our natural states. Stay engaged in valued activities.

Once resilience is built, it becomes easier to deal with unforeseen adversity when it arises. We realise that we have been in bad situations before and have gotten through them. Bharti is one of my finest examples. She taught our support group yoga asanas, was vocal and participated in all our support group meetings, and sometimes made special snacks and brought them to share with us. She emerged from her double tragedy as a warm and receptive person, teaching us that resilience is also uplifting. Eventually, she could speak about her son and her happy memories of him with fondness, although always in a choked voice. The grief was less, but the loss will be with her in silent acceptance. She wrote poems and stories that reflected her feelings. Although initially they were dark and morose, over time her writing began to reflect that, amidst all chaos, there is also balance and calm. She got there. Just a month ago, another support group member was reminiscing about her own dark days and she remembered Bharti as a role model. Today, Bharti is living her physical, mental/emotional, spiritual, and social life fully.



Bharti then and now with her daughter.

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I CAN BE CHANGED BY WHAT HAPPENS TO ME. BUT I REFUSE TO BE REDUCED BY IT.

— MAYA ANGELOU

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Providing dignity and hope in Timor Leste



Jo Lovelock with the team in Timor Leste.



Jo Lovelock, Breast Care Nurse Midwife
Australia

Timor Leste is a one-hour flight from Darwin in Australia. Australia has a long history with the Timorese people, especially after their vote for independence in 1999.

I am a nurse/midwife and, since my own breast cancer diagnosis in 2002, I have been providing support to others through my link with Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) and Reach to Recovery International (RRI). Through RRI, I have met a wonderful community of strong women who work toward improving outcomes for others with a cancer diagnosis. I completed further education and have been working as a breast care nurse for over 10 years. This experience, together with local and international RRI contacts, has enabled me to volunteer in amazing places.

In 2019, I was given an opportunity to travel to Timor Leste with Ranji Kaur as part of an ABC [Advanced Breast Cancer] Global Alliance initiative to work with Haliku, which is a local cancer charity that provides education and support to women and their families experiencing cancer. Ranjit and her team provided education on breast awareness and treatments as well as peer support.

The incidence of breast cancer in Timor Leste can only be estimated, with the majority presenting at an advanced stage. Many breast cancers there present as an open wound. There is a high mortality rate from breast cancer in Timor Leste.

The three nurses with the team, Rosie, Jenny, and myself, were given the challenging role of providing education on wounds and wound care to the health workers in a poorly resourced setting. If the women present to the local hospital, they have access to doctors and nurses who can provide supportive care, such as cleaning, wound dressings, and pain relief. Without radiotherapy, these wounds are hard to treat. People can travel to Indonesia with government support to receive chemotherapy and radiotherapy for cancer treatment. In the outer regions this becomes increasingly difficult, however. In those regions even travel to the community health centres can be

difficult; travel to the capital city of Dili even more so.

After extensive research and many challenges, we decided to trial a reusable wound care kit modeled on Days For Girls® reusable menstrual hygiene kits, which have been successfully used globally over many years. These kits were called Dignidade (Dignity) Wound Kits, with the goal of providing women and their families/communities a reusable resource that would last for many months. The kits consist of a pictorial instruction sheet, as there is a low literacy rate in Timor Leste, as well as what's needed for hand-washing, bathing the wound with cloths soaked in cooled green tea, applying Vaseline/Vaseline sugar paste covered with clean reusable cloth pads, and covering the wound with an outer charcoal infused pad held in place with a 'boob tube'.

The goal of the Dignidade Kits is to promote cleanliness, decrease bacterial growth, lessen malodour (bad odour) and protect the wound. This will assist with improving the woman's quality of life. Stigma and malodour can restrict a woman's ability to interact with her family and community.

Due to the pandemic, Rosie, Jenny, and I were unable to return to Timor Leste for several years. We kept in contact with Haliku staff, Mana Marku and Mana Qhella. We shared information and resources and provided funding for ongoing educational opportunities.

In 2024, we returned to Timor Leste. We provided funds to support Haliku to organise a day of shared learning with doctors, nurses, and health workers. We provided information regarding awareness, diagnosis, treatments, and ongoing use of the Dignidade Kits. Verbal feedback about use of the kits thus far included:

- increased communication from cancer patients with Haliku for ongoing support
- women were grateful for a resource to

care for their wound (previously leaves and rags had been used)

- reports from health workers that wound kit use had decreased malodour
- increased family and community engagement occurred.

The afternoon was spent with breast cancer survivors and health care professionals attending a RRI communication and self-care workshop.

We have built solid relationships with Haliku and plan to continue working with them. They are currently building a facility in the capital that will offer accommodation. Women from outer regional areas with no family network can stay and receive support whilst having diagnostic appointments and treatment.

In 2025 we plan to return to Timor Leste to volunteer with Haliku, going to the country regions to share learning and knowledge with health care professionals in their own communities. We self-fund our flights and accommodation and will fundraise to cover the costs of the shared learning experiences with local health workers.

Those who know me, know that I recycle bras and breast prostheses throughout the world. We also shared donated bras, prosthesis, and replenished the Dignidade Kits.

Please wish us success!



A Dignidade (Dignity) Wound Kit

Vulnerable but hopeful: The breast cancer trajectory for Palestinian patients and survivors

Suhiela Hijazi and Carol El Jabari,
Patient's Friends Society Jerusalem (PFS)

For Palestinians, life change forever on 7 October 2023.

There has been untold but daily-seen misery, deprivation, and so much more on many levels, not least of which by cancer patients, survivors, and their loved ones.

Cancer patients in Gaza do not have access to medicines, radiotherapy, and surgery. Even if there are medicines and qualified staff, the priority is to deal with the thousands of injured. The majority of at least two million persons in Gaza suffer from homelessness, without shelter or their basic needs being met.

There are usually hundreds of new cases of breast cancer diagnosed each year in Gaza and the occupied West Bank. Early detection is out of the question for thousands of women in Gaza as hospitals and clinics have been destroyed. On the West Bank, access and affordability severely limits a person's ability to receive the necessary healthcare. There are currently more than 700 road blocks and closures imposed by the Israeli authorities all over the area. In the West Bank and East Jerusalem, we are subjected to the repercussions of the war on Gaza, facing closures and a blockade that affects all aspects of health, economy, society, and psychological well-being.

The situation is not easy; it sometimes reaches a level of despair, compounded by fear and anxiety. However, we continue with the resources we have, even though they are limited. We are a people who believe that hope and freedom are undoubtedly on the way, so we will keep building and supporting our community through awareness and education.

Our team continues to provide support and health education to the community as a whole, but in particular to the cancer support group "Sunrise". The group's members participate in various activities and seek out new opportunities for learning, knowledge, and empowerment, despite the health challenges they face. They have a strong passion for learning and gaining knowledge, which empowers us to keep going.

We are here to be a strong voice for women and to reflect hope and determination in everything we do. Each success story among us is a testament to the strength of will and challenge, representing a new beginning for every woman hoping for a better life. We believe that, together, we can build a community that promotes women's rights and addresses their issues and needs. Let us all stand hand in hand to make a real difference and illuminate the paths of hope in a world filled with challenges.

Let us continue to convey this powerful message to all who need it and inspire one another to create a bright future filled with hope and opportunities for women, with their exceptional capabilities.

Here are some images that prove the hope, passion for life, resilience, and love for learning,



©PFS Jerusalem: Breast Cancer Awareness event at Dura Hospital for healthcare workers, survivors, students and the general public. October 2024



©PFS Jerusalem



©PFS Jerusalem: Psychological support session to improve mental health through theater and art for cancer survivors & healthy women. October 2024

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EACH SUCCESS STORY AMONG US IS A TESTAMENT TO THE STRENGTH OF WILL AND CHALLENGE, REPRESENTING A NEW BEGINNING FOR EVERY WOMAN HOPING FOR A BETTER LIFE.

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Balancing ambition and health: The rising threat of breast cancer among Jamaica's corporate women

Mesha-Gaye Ruddock

Jamaica



Mesha-Gaye Ruddock

Breast cancer doesn't discriminate based on a woman's success. As a corporate professional, I learned this firsthand. Breast cancer is not just a statistic — it's a reality that reshapes lives, families, and futures. The increasing diagnoses of breast cancer among corporate women in Jamaica is deeply concerning, and Dr. Jason Copeland, a breast surgical oncologist, reports that Jamaican women are diagnosed at an earlier average age of 54, compared to the 60s in the U.S. More aggressive cancer types are also being found in Jamaica, where the mortality risk is two to three times higher than in Western Europe or North America.

It's time we take a hard look at what's happening and why and — more importantly — what we, as women, our employers, and our society, can do to combat this growing health crisis

The Pressure to Succeed and Its Hidden Cost

Corporate Jamaica is a fast-paced, high-pressure environment. From managing tight deadlines and endless meetings to balancing family commitments, women are expected to excel in every area of their lives. The result? Many of us sacrifice self-care for success, leaving little to no time to focus on our health.

I was so focused on work that I may have overlooked warning signs my body was sending. When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, it shook me to the core. I thought, "How could this happen? I'm only 28!" But breast cancer doesn't wait for you to be ready. It doesn't care about deadlines, promotions, or roles at work.

My Journey: From Diagnosis to Determination

The news of breast cancer came to me like a jolt, reminding me of how easily our ambitions can obscure our self-care. I remember feeling a small lump and initially dismissing it as "probably nothing." Yet, a persistent inner voice urged me to get it checked. That decision — choosing to listen to my body over my busy schedule — saved my life. Diagnosed

at only 28, I suddenly faced a reality I never anticipated. My life was put on pause, my priorities forcibly reshaped.

In those early days after my diagnosis, I struggled to reconcile my career ambitions with my health needs. I realized that my journey wasn't just a personal challenge but an opportunity to advocate for change in our corporate spaces. I became aware of how many women, particularly in demanding work environments, ignore their own health, sometimes until it's too late.

The Alarming Rise of Diagnoses

Dr. Copeland shared that breast cancer rates are on the decline in North America and Western Europe, yet they continue to rise in Jamaica. Statistics confirm that breast cancer is the most common cancer among Jamaican women, with 1,327 new cases reported in 2022 — making up 35% of cancer cases in Jamaican women. High-stress environments, lack of sleep, and lifestyle factors in corporate settings only add to this risk.

My experience reinforced the significance of early detection. Regular self-exams and listening to one's body are vital — especially for those of us trying to "do it all" at work and at home. I am living proof that early detection makes all the difference. But for us to reach this point, we must be proactive and make time for our health.

A Call for Change in Corporate Jamaica

Employers have a vital role in breast cancer awareness and prevention. Corporate Jamaica can do more by fostering work environments that encourage regular health check-ups, wellness days, and flexible work hours to accommodate medical appointments. Health isn't a distraction; it's the foundation that allows us to thrive in our careers.

Concrete steps companies can take include offering paid medical leave, in-house wellness programs, or partnering with health organizations to promote screenings and awareness initiatives.

I was fortunate to have a supportive workplace, but many women feel isolated and pressured to "keep up" at work, even while undergoing treatment. My journey showed me the necessity of supportive work environments, not only for the sake of compassion but also for the well-being and retention of women who are the backbone of corporate Jamaica.

The Power of Solidarity and Action

October has come and gone, a time when we see pink ribbons and awareness events everywhere. But while this month shines a spotlight on the fight against breast cancer, our efforts must extend beyond those 31 days. Breast cancer is an ongoing challenge, one that requires consistent vigilance and action all year long. Beyond the ribbons and events, we must commit to regular check-ups, advocate for health-conscious workplaces, and create environments where women feel supported in taking care of their health daily. It's through sustained action, not a one-month long awareness campaign, that we'll make real progress in this fight.

My Message to Every Corporate Woman

Breast cancer has taught me the value of life, the importance of self-care, and the power of early action. You can't pour from an empty cup. No matter how passionate you are about your career, your health comes first.

Breast cancer doesn't define me, but it is now a part of my story. I want to use my story to encourage other women to take control of their health, to speak up, and to demand more from themselves and their workplaces. Together, we will be proactive, vigilant, and victorious!

Bouncing back with exercise: how dragon boating helps breast cancer survivors

Rachel Hosking
Australia

My name is Rachel. In 1998, at the age of 34, I was diagnosed with a grade 3 triple-negative breast cancer. I had a lumpectomy to remove a portion of the breast to give good clearance margins, then had 4 rounds of anthracyclines chemotherapy and 3 months of radiation. Apart from yearly checkups, my treatment was straightforward and is now a distant memory. I do recall that it was a very lonely time for me, as there were far fewer support networks available back then to breast cancer patients.

My interest in dragon boating was piqued when I saw an article in a breast cancer publication that I subscribed to in the early 2000's. It came to my attention again, via another article earlier this year, so I suggested to a good friend, who has been on her own cancer journey, that it was something we could do together.

I reached out to Dragons Abreast Brisbane after an online search for my closest team, and we both went for our 'come and try' sessions with Team Missabittatitti. What a great group of lovely ladies — they made us feel welcome from the first time we stepped into a boat! We both thoroughly enjoyed ourselves and have now become full-fledged members of the team. The interactions with everyone have been very positive and I am loving the Saturday morning sessions that start the day off on the right foot. This is one of the best things I have done in recent times and I look forward to the continued training, with the possibility of taking it to levels where I could compete one day. Baby steps though...

Members are always planning their next paddling adventure, like the recent Pink Paddle Power regatta which saw almost 300 paddlers gather in the stunning surrounds of Hobart, Tasmania, for a regatta, dazzling dinner, social paddle, and coaching clinic with world renowned coach Kamini Jane. Internationally, through Dragons Abreast Australia's connection with the International Breast Cancer Paddlers Commission (IBCPC), travel plans are well advanced for the next participatory festival to be held in Aix Les Bans, Southern France, in August 2026.

Dragons Abreast Australia encourages breast cancer survivors and their supporters to get active by participating in the sport of dragon boat paddling. Our mission is to promote physical and mental well-being after a breast cancer diagnosis through connection, movement, and living a full and active life with amazing new friends.

Increasingly the medical sector is advising that staying active is key to cancer prevention and healing. Exercise is medicine — it reduces the risk of a recurrence of breast cancer by up to 55% and supports physical and mental recovery for survivors. Dragon boat paddling, specifically, is known to reduce the risks of developing lymphedema, improve cardiovascular health, and assist with maintaining a healthy weight.

For more information, check out www.dragonsabreast.com.au



Rachel and her daughter shortly after Rachel's diagnosis.



Years after her diagnosis, Rachel and her daughter at her daughter's wedding.

The breast cancer survivor's relationship with dress: A qualitative analysis of a woman's journey into reconstructing her identity through self-preservation

Claudienne Harb CPA FCCA, MSc
Malta



Claudienne Harb

A Maltese study was conducted locally to understand how a breast cancer diagnosis and the resulting treatments affect the relationship of female patients with dress (clothing) and fashion. The research was approached from a philosophical world view of constructivism (the theory that people are meaning-makers in their lives and essentially construct their own realities), mainly because this type of study needed humanistic and respectful connection between the researcher and the voluntary participants. The study's goal was to attain a thorough understanding of women's rehabilitative processes, with a special focus on clothing requirements.

The primary objective was to determine how the body image of a patient receiving treatment for breast cancer is impacted and what clothing challenges she will be faced with. The preservation of life remains an undisputed mission for both those diagnosed with breast cancer and their physicians and interdisciplinary team. However, as life moves on, those affected by the diagnosis and consequential side effects may be challenged with shame and stigma while navigating through their societal re-integration. These challenges can be overcome with the help of adjustment strategies which may include body modifications such as breast reconstructive surgery, body art, prosthetics, and the purposeful use of clothing and accessories. Changes to these women's wardrobes included, but were not limited to, styling changes such as using wider straps for top garments to accommodate surgical or mastectomy bras, replacement of underwired bras with ones that contain built-in pockets for the use of prostheses for symmetry adjustment of the torso area, and the use of wigs and scarves to cover temporary alopecia (hair loss) caused by chemotherapeutic drugs.

Some women found prostheses to be heavy and cumbersome to use, but at the same time they acknowledged that

they succeeded in camouflaging the imperfections left from surgery. Local supply issues and exorbitant cost of adaptive clothing for women affected by breast cancer were, and still are, great challenges that patients would rather not contend with on top of their diagnoses and respective treatments. On the positive side, experimenting with scarves, cosmetics, and accessories has been found to be successful by using camouflaging techniques. For instance, scarves were found necessary to hide the scars when full coverage was difficult. Scarves were also used to help with partial or complete hair loss. Being in control of one's physical appearance and body image is regarded as a vital component of recovery.

A second objective of the research was to identify information gaps in the current services available to breast cancer survivors in relation to clothing advice and improvement of appearances. At the time of the study, it was concluded that, in Malta, women diagnosed with breast cancer felt neglected and misinformed in tackling special aesthetic needs. However, they also remarked that the treatments are delivered by medical teams whose professionalism is unquestionable. Yet, pertinent information on specialised attire is not readily available. The research tackled the scarcity of hospital gowns for the concealment of surgical drainage containers, limitations on the choice of mastectomy bras that are needed post-surgery, and limited prostheses styles, sizes, and colours. More information on how to access these products could provide relief for the distress that results from breast cancer surgeries. Information about scalp cooling therapies for possible hair-loss prevention should also be made public. In fact, hair-loss was labelled as the worst offender to the breast cancer patients' body image. Knowing that there are potential means of preventing

hair loss can give hope throughout rehabilitation.

Sexuality is still an under-represented topic for breast cancer patients. With the early onset of menopause as an uninvited side effect, women described the loss of sex drive as another blow to their psychological well-being. It has also been suggested that the abandonment of sensual attire and underwear due to bodily changes may contribute to women feeling unattractive and undesired. Can prettier underwear be part of the solution? With certainty, apparel industry experts have the resources to kickstart processes for the creation of relevant prototypes for this section of marginalised consumers.

A newly diagnosed breast cancer patient has every right to receive full disclosure of what is about to happen, not just from a medical standpoint but also from an appearance-related perspective. This research in particular exposes the need for academics to conduct further studies into these issues so that solutions are offered to interested stakeholders. Womanhood can be preserved if the patient has access to the necessary resources.

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WITH CERTAINTY, APPAREL INDUSTRY EXPERTS HAVE THE RESOURCES TO KICKSTART PROCESSES FOR THE CREATION OF RELEVANT PROTOTYPES FOR THIS SECTION OF MARGINALISED CONSUMERS.

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A follow-up with the Reach to Recovery volunteers featured in *Silver linings: finding the positive after breast cancer*

Introduction by **Cathy Hirsch**, *Immediate Past President, Current Vice President and Treasurer of RRI USA*



Cathy Hirsch

As a long-time Reach to Recovery volunteer for the American Cancer Society, and through my affiliation with Reach to Recovery International since 2008, I've met hundreds – maybe even thousands – of breast cancer patients and survivors. I can honestly say that almost all of them have inspired me, in different ways, to make the best of my own lived experience with breast cancer and to help others do the same. In 2011, I produced a short video profiling five truly remarkable women who, at the time, were Reach to Recovery volunteers in my home state of Maryland. Each had achieved remarkable accomplishments despite, and in some cases because of, their breast cancer diagnoses. I first introduced the video at the 16th Reach to Recovery International Breast Cancer Support Conference in Taipei, Taiwan. For those of you who have not seen the video or would like to see it again, click the button at right.

The selection of the theme *Finding hope and building resilience following a breast cancer diagnosis* for this edition of Bloom prompted me to follow up with these five amazing women to find out how, and what, they are doing now, all these years after their breast cancer journeys began. Please read on for their updated stories, in their own words.



[CLICK HERE TO WATCH](#)
[Silver Linings: Finding the Positive After Breast Cancer](#)

Living Beyond Survival: My Journey After Breast Cancer

Janet Ladd, PCC, SPHR / USA



“Go live your life.” Those four simple words were meant to close the chapter on my cancer journey. But as I left the hospital that day—my body still trembling—I knew they carried

a deeper meaning. Cancer had upended my life, changing the way I saw everything, and I realized this wasn't just a return to “normal.” It was an invitation to live differently, and that understanding has shaped my life in ways I never could have imagined.

Looking back to those initial months of navigating the unknown, I can still feel the shock of my diagnosis. I was healthy, active, and had no family history of cancer. Telling my husband was heart-wrenching, and facing my young children, unsure if I'd be there as they grew up, was one of the most vulnerable moments I'd ever experienced. But amid the surgeries,

treatments, and fear, I found myself questioning whether I was truly living in alignment with my values or simply keeping up with life's demands.

Surviving cancer wasn't just about physical recovery. It sparked in me a powerful realization that I wanted to live with intention, that life was too precious to be taken for granted. The need for purpose became undeniable and, eventually, it inspired me to leave my former role as a technology executive to become a coach in leadership and wellness. This new path felt uncertain at first, yet the pull to support others in finding their own sense of clarity and fulfillment was stronger.

Through my past volunteer work with cancer survivors—both with the American Cancer Society's Reach to Recovery program and as a wellness coach for the Moving Forward Together research initiative—I've connected with others just beginning their journey, walking alongside them in a way that only a shared experience

allows. These encounters taught me the power of empathy, resilience, and community. The relationships I built with other survivors have left a lasting impact, deepening my commitment to supporting individuals through life's challenges and guiding them toward lives of meaning and intent.

Today, I carry those lessons into my coaching practice, helping others uncover their own values and purpose, supporting them in finding ways to live with greater presence and self-compassion. I've come to believe that we don't need a drastic wake-up call to pursue a purpose-driven life, though I understand how easy it is, as humans, to slip back into our “default” routines. My journey with cancer revealed that resilience and intentionality are within reach for us all, but it requires mindful effort to stay connected to what truly matters, whether we're facing life's biggest challenges or simply managing the weight of everyday responsibilities.

I truly believe that each of us has the capacity to thrive, to choose a life that feels both authentic and fulfilling. For me, cancer was a turning point, and it's now my privilege to help others find strength, purpose, and meaning in their own journeys.

“Yesterday is history, you don’t know about tomorrow, all you know for sure is today”

Venus Turner Daniels / USA



Venus, Karla, and Eddie

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer. In 1999, I was working in banking and dating Eddie Daniels, the man I would eventually marry. Eddie stood by me every step of the way, even

though we believed that chemotherapy had pushed me into menopause and we would never be able to have children. Not long after my treatment ended, both of my parents passed away in short succession. I continued on in my banking career, but I found that my heart wasn't in it anymore. Because I enjoyed helping and taking care of others, I began taking nursing courses

and eventually was certified as a nurse. I specialize in home health care, including hospice.

As the *Silver linings* video shows, it turned out that Eddie and I were mistaken about not being able to have children. To our surprise and delight, a visit to a doctor to find out why I wasn't feeling well revealed that I was expecting a baby! Our beautiful daughter, Karla, was born in 2005. She's now in her second year of college.

Cancer taught me and Eddie to live in the present – yesterday is history, you don't know about tomorrow, all you know for sure is today. Enjoy the moment. Take nothing and no one for granted. And, most importantly, keep moving forward. Stick to your schedule, and don't change it unless you absolutely must. Keeping busy helps

keep depression down and keeps you from dwelling on your problems.

These life lessons helped us when, eight years ago, Eddie was diagnosed with an aggressive prostate cancer. We continued to live our lives as fully as possible, with Eddie continuing to work as an accountant and to remain involved with family, friends, and our church. Unfortunately, Eddie passed from the cancer this past August.

Karla and I continue to live by the lessons Eddie and I learned during my own cancer experience. I still work in home health care and Karla goes to school. We get out, socialize, and we're planning to host family and friends for Christmas, which is exactly what Eddie would want us to do. We're grateful for the time we had with him and the memories we will always have. Through all this we've learned that hurdles will always keep coming. We need to look at each one as a temporary inconvenience and keep moving forward. I face each day with my favorite scripture in mind: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13).

A different path

Nicole Dover / USA



At the age of 20, I was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer, a journey that led me through chemotherapy, radiation, a bilateral mastectomy, deep flap revision, and

10 years of hormone therapy. While the physical toll was immense, it was the inner journey that shaped me most. Participating in a documentary alongside other breast cancer survivors, we focused on finding silver linings and promoting positivity through the most challenging of times.

Now, at 38, I find myself on a different path, having been diagnosed with stage four metastatic breast cancer. Just past the one-year mark since this recurrence, my life has undergone a complete transformation. What once seemed like an obstacle has become an invitation—a call to align with my true self, embrace healing, and step into a deeper purpose.

Alongside my personal journey, I've dedicated the last 16 years to working as a clinical social worker, supporting children, adolescents, and families. I also continue to run a nonprofit special inclusive dance group, creating spaces where all individuals feel seen and supported. This past summer, I embarked on further self-discovery and connection through women's spiritual retreats, including an immersive experience in Mexico and Costa Rica. These journeys were both grounding and transformative, reconnecting me with my inner strength, intuition, and the beauty of sisterhood.

Blogging my journey has allowed me to share my wisdom, knowledge, and strength with others, impacting lives and inspiring people to become better versions of themselves. Through social media, I share health hacks, product swaps, and ways to take control of our health, focusing on holistic and integrative approaches beyond conventional treatment. I believe deeply in the body's ability to heal and reverse disease. I've learned that disease can be a messenger, revealing to me that I was not living in alignment with my truest self. Instead of allowing fear and illness to dictate my life, I've chosen to view this as an opportunity to reconnect with my divine purpose. I've been called to live fully, with passion and enthusiasm, and to spread that energy to others.

Now, as I undertake two 200-hour yoga teacher trainings, I'm expanding my tools to support my own healing and to help others find peace and wellness. Through women's workshops, I'm creating spaces where women can come together to support one another on their own healing journeys. These workshops, along with my online presence, have become powerful tools for promoting health and empowerment within my community.

Years after my initial diagnosis, my journey continues to reveal deeper layers of growth, resilience, and gratitude. The silver lining is this: cancer taught me to live fully, authentically, and with unwavering hope. I believe that life's challenges are opportunities to grow, to realign, and to live authentically. For me, this journey is about much more than surviving—it's about thriving, living life to the fullest, and surrendering to the beautiful flow of divine purpose.



Living my best life every day

Serena Chou / USA



When I was diagnosed with cancer in June of 2010, I was frustrated and didn't want the diagnosis to affect my life. Throughout the entire treatment process,

I refused to change my plans and lifestyle to accommodate the necessary procedures.

Before the diagnosis, I had registered to run the Marine Corps Marathon in October of 2010 (my 5th Marine Corps marathon!), and I continued with my training plan while I was receiving chemotherapy. I ran a half-marathon the day after my final chemotherapy treatment, and three weeks after that I ran the Marine Corps Marathon

and crossed the finish line. Luckily, my two daughters were supportive and were there for me through each step of my journey, which made the experience more secure and comfortable.

My cancer journey did not make me bitter, in part because I was fortunate enough to have a peer support volunteer who was a breast cancer survivor and who was not only knowledgeable about the cancer spectrum but also skilled in providing emotional support to me when I needed it the most. I am very grateful for the support I received from her.

Thanks to her affiliation with Reach to Recovery International, I was invited to participate in the 18th Reach to Recovery International Breast Cancer Support Conference in Beijing, China in 2015, where I served as a translator for the

English-language speakers.

Since retiring from the Pennsylvania State civil service as a licensing representative in 2013, I have been working full time as a Mandarin and Cantonese interpreter, and also obtained my realtor license in Florida. I continue to run daily and have now completed 10 marathons and 25 half marathons. I also enjoy traveling with my daughters to places such as Australia, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Italy, Ireland, New Zealand, and Singapore. Life is a blessing and I'm looking forward to the next adventure!

All these years later, my cancer experience continues to remind me to view life and make choices with kindness and from my heart because tomorrow is never promised. It taught me to live my best life every day!

“I have learned from my cancer experience that I am a strong, positive, and happy person”

Elisa Portillo / USA



My own breast cancer experience in 1996 brought home to me that many Spanish-speaking patients have difficulty navigating the health-care system in the

US. I began working and volunteering to help other breast cancer patients arrange the appointments and care they needed. Although I'm no longer formally involved in patient navigation, I do still provide emotional support to breast cancer patients I'm connected with through my family and circle of friends.

The gratification I got from helping patients inspired me to go back to school 10 years ago to get my nursing degree. I also took additional courses in order to get certified as a technician so I could

work as a medication technician nurse. I spent several years working as a nurse for Associated Catholic Charities and later at a senior citizen community. In 2022, I moved from Maryland, where I had lived for many years, to Oklahoma. Since then, I have been doing quite a bit of international travelling, some for pleasure and some to take care of my brother who has been sick.

I have learned from my cancer experience that I am a strong, positive, and happy person who can overcome any obstacle. In the last few years I have been involved in two serious accidents which each resulted in broken bones. It wasn't easy, but my strong faith in God and my resilience and positive outlook help me achieve complete recoveries each time.

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THE GRATIFICATION I GOT FROM HELPING PATIENTS INSPIRED ME TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL 10 YEARS AGO AND GET MY NURSING DEGREE.

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Personal stories of hope and resilience from survivors:

Shirley's story

A message of hope through art

Shirley Bianca / Germany



I was born in 1941 in the Netherlands, and in the 1960s I moved to Cologne in Germany.

In the year 2000, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was fortunate to

be referred to a highly qualified oncoplastic surgeon in Düsseldorf who performed breast conserving surgery with partial reconstruction.

After chemotherapy and radiation, while spending the winter months in the state of Florida in the USA, I started to think about unlocking my creative potential to find ways to heal emotionally. I spontaneously decided to buy paint, brushes, and canvases. This was the beginning of happy feelings — emotional healing — which I then expressed with passion on my canvases. It was very exciting because I had never painted before.

One day I began sorting through the images and motifs which I had created in my subconscious and I noticed, being proud of my survival, that I had managed

to depict my life with bright colours. Just for fun, I selected 22 paintings from all my works and used them to make a video of my breast cancer story. I titled the video my "Message of Hope".

I started to think more about how art had helped with my emotional healing and wondered if my video might help other breast cancer patients by giving them hope and consolation after their diagnoses. The answer was "Yes". International cancer organisations invited me to present my story of survival and talk about "getting back to normal life". I've had opportunities to share my "Message of Hope" in many countries. A highlight was the exhibition of my paintings in the European Parliament in Brussels, which was hosted by the Romanian Member of the European Parliament, Daciana Sarbu.

Meanwhile I became an active volunteer and patient advocate for the ZEBRA Breast Cancer Counselling Center in Düsseldorf, Germany.

Despite recurrences in 2005 and 2018, with triple-negative breast cancer each time, I never gave up. My awareness of the importance of undergoing surgery by a

certified breast surgeon was growing constantly. With help and support of the magazine "Cancer World", I was able to reach out to the leading breast surgeons in Europe, advocating that *Patients deserve the best treatment, we need certified breast surgeons, specialists highly qualified and trained.*

The result was the foundation of the Breast Surgical Oncology Platform (BRESO), of which I became a member. BRESO works to raise and harmonise the quality and standards of breast surgical oncology across Europe. The organisation has established the European Certification in Breast Surgery.

For many years I have let breast cancer and art walk hand in hand around the world, motivating cancer patients to find out how to express feelings through art, which can heal both soul and body.

Art is Life and Life is Art



CLICK HERE TO WATCH

Shirley's Message of Hope

Kay's story

Kay Fox / Australia



After a delayed diagnosis of Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) and invasive carcinoma in 2008, at age 54, I began the journey through unilateral mastectomy,

chemotherapy, radiation (25 doses), and hormone therapy (Arimidex and tamoxifen) for ten years.

During this time, I had huge support from family, friends and organisations, all of which helped me be resilient, with lots of hope and affirmation for a successful outcome. I saw resilience, especially in my husband and parents, as they nurtured me, the way our daughter was nurtured for 14 months before her death from

Leukaemia in 1998. Hope and gratitude helped build resilience.

Being fortunate enough to leave work, I could concentrate on becoming strong with exercises (on a DVD I was given by the Choices Cancer Support Centre) to avoid cording, gradually walking for longer and caring for my body as never before. I kept a detailed diary, which was invaluable when I couldn't remember details due to chemo brain, as well as being an affirmation of the journey.

Whenever I went outside our home, I tried to look my best — makeup, turbans to match my outfit, and drawing on my eyebrows when I became completely hairless! I had new opportunities to meet other breast cancer patients, nurses, and doctors and we could share experiences unique to us.

In 2010, I had a TRAM Flap Reconstruction, and I didn't need to wear a prosthesis or worry that lighter, home-made ones might pop out! I also had a nipple reconstruction

and tattoo, all of which really helped my self-image and confidence. My reconstructed breast is named Ruby, and is holding up well. Finding comfortable bras is still a challenge, especially with one breast lower than the other!

As the years have progressed, various challenges have presented themselves, one of which was lymphoedema in my right arm. This made access to my veins more difficult, as my left arm veins were damaged with chemotherapy treatment. I am very fortunate to be able to have had lymphatic drainage and massage as well as compression sleeves to manage the lymphoedema.

For me, the best way to engender resilience has been to reach out to family, friends and agencies who can support and care for me. With their help, I have been able to help myself in the best way possible, and lead a life with very positive influences. Some of my most resilient friends are my *Breast Friends*, and we love hearing each other's stories.

Tinu's story

My journey of resilience

Oluseun Atinuke Sanusi / *Founder, Atinuke Cancer Foundation*
Nigeria



Soon after being diagnosed with breast cancer and beginning treatment, I realized that the road to recovery was about more than just beating the disease. It also

was about reclaiming my life, finding joy in small things, and staying hopeful even on the darkest days.

With my background in media, keeping a diary of my daily experiences became my anchor. I began writing during treatment, as my eyes were opened to many anomalies within the oncology and radiotherapy sectors in my country. The lack of equipment and the shortage of manpower in cancer treatment at the time were glaring issues that needed serious attention. I witnessed and learnt about many cases of cancer mortality that could have been prevented if the right equipment had been available. Writing allowed me to document these challenges, providing a clear record of what needed to be advocated for, even when I felt stuck in a cycle of pain and fatigue.

Advocating and creating awareness campaigns became irresistible to me, even though cancer was heavily stigmatized in Nigeria at the time. This drive led to the founding of the Atinuke Cancer Foundation – with the slogan *Let's kill it!* – which is my platform to advocate for others. I have dedicated myself to spreading the message of early detection, sharing my survival story, and supporting those currently battling cancer through various forums – Nigerian television, radio, newspapers, social media, and my blogspot.

One of the most pivotal moments occurred when my story became the first cancer survivor story aired by BBC News Pidgin for World Cancer Day in February 2017, marking the news services launch in Nigeria. Not only did I quickly become a beacon of hope for new breast cancer patients; I also found new purpose. Helping others and being part of a larger movement that emphasizes strength, resilience, and survival has brought me a

profound sense of healing and fulfillment. It has highlighted the power of advocacy and giving back. One of the most powerful sources of strength for me has been the support from others who truly understand the journey. I developed a close-knit bond with the medical doctors who treated me at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, and I connected with the broader community of the Atinuke Cancer Foundation friends and survivors who have walked the same path. All this has brought a profound sense of solidarity.

I also found strength in meeting incredible individuals, such as the African Barbie Heiress, Chika Akwivu, and other champions I encountered at the 19th Reach to Recovery Breast Cancer Conference in Prague, Czech Republic. It wasn't just about sharing tips for managing side effects or discussing treatment options. It was also about the comfort of knowing I wasn't alone.

The advice of many experts in oncology, psychology, and wellness has been instrumental in maintaining a positive outlook. I have also drawn strength from the support of the journalists and colleagues who helped broadcast my message of hope and, most especially, the God-sent sponsors who believed in my vision and mission. This camaraderie has been a lifeline, offering hope and encouragement on even the hardest days.

Countless people from varying backgrounds around the world are working together and spreading messages of support, advocacy, and survivorship. The Atinuke Cancer Foundation is just one example of an organization that provides a platform to raise awareness and support and encourage others. My upcoming event to celebrate one decade of survival is a testament to the power of resilience. Events like these remind us of the strength we all possess and the importance of celebrating every milestone, no matter how big or small.

If there's one thing I know, it's that our stories matter. Each of us has a unique journey, but what ties us together is our resilience — our determination to live fully

despite the challenges we've faced. Let's continue to support one another and to celebrate the beautiful, vibrant lives we are living. This is just a starting point and I hope it resonates with others who are navigating their own journey. Sharing love can make a world of difference to someone who may be feeling lost or alone in their fight against cancer.

Together, we triumph! *LET'S KILL IT!*

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ADVOCATING AND CREATING AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS BECAME IRRESISTIBLE TO ME, EVEN THOUGH CANCER WAS HEAVILY STIGMATIZED IN NIGERIA AT THE TIME.

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Nidhi's story

Laleh Busheri, CEO, Prashanti Cancer Care Mission

India



Laleh Busheri

During my decade-long tenure as CEO of Prashanti Cancer Care Mission (PCCM), a non-governmental organization, I've had the privilege of connecting with breast cancer patients and

understanding their unique, personal struggles. In India, it's rare for women to share personal challenges publicly for the benefit of others. To help overcome this, I have conducted prevention campaigns and awareness talks and created support groups where patients can share, connect and uplift each other. We hold activities designed to keep their spirits high and help them stay motivated throughout their journeys.

Through PCCM's Orchids Breast Health Centre (Orchids) in Pune, I meet women at various stages of life and diagnosis. Each of them has faced a multitude of difficult challenges and has had to draw inner strength to overcome them. There are too many stories of strength and resilience to write about here; therefore I have chosen to share the story of one patient who stands out vividly in my memory because of her exceptional determination and courage.

Nidhi (whose name has been changed to protect her privacy) pursued her dreams of studying abroad against her family's expectations. During her studies she met Akash, a kindhearted person who understood Nidhi's aspirations, and soon they got married. After a few years, they returned to India to take care of Akash's parent, and Nidhi settled into family life. As years passed, Nidhi noticed herself changing, gaining weight, and feeling disconnected from the interests that had once brought her pleasure. Determined to change she started to work on herself. She began jogging, which soon turned into passion for running. At age 46, she participated in several marathons and her hard work placed her among the top finishers. Balancing family responsibilities, she discovered a new enthusiasm for fitness.

One day, just before the Delhi Half Marathon, Nidhi felt severe pain in her right breast, which she had never experienced in the past. She sought medical attention and was advised to get a biopsy of the lump. Despite the anxiety, she kept her spirits high and gave her best efforts to running the marathon. After returning home, Nidhi and her family received her biopsy report. The diagnosis was a shock: breast cancer. Nidhi felt her world tremble, but something inside her refused to break. She knew she couldn't give in to fear. She knew that, with her loved ones always by her side, she could get through this phase. Nidhi's diagnosis did scare her, but she compartmentalized it as just another obstacle that she needed to overcome.

With a strong mindset, Nidhi entered treatment at Orchids under the care of breast surgeon Dr. C.B. Koppiker. Dr. Koppiker developed a multifaceted treatment plan for her. She had surgery immediately, followed by four rounds of chemotherapy. She underwent breast reconstruction, which she described as an instrument to make her feel like herself again. While undergoing the chemotherapy regimen, she was worried that the chemo cycles would lead to severe nausea and dehydration that might require that she be hospitalized. Dr. Koppiker put all her assumptions and fears to rest. Nidhi's immunity was very strong; she was able to cope well with the chemotherapy drugs and the rest of the medications. Throughout her treatment, Nidhi stayed resolute, drawing on the strength of her loved ones and a support group she had joined. Hearing others' stories of survival gave her courage, and she grew more determined each day to return to her passions.

I last interacted with Nidhi when she was training for a Tata Ultra Marathon in Lonavala. Her story reminds me why we continue this work at Orchids – to inspire hope, foster resilience, and bring people closer. Our approach aims to address not only the medical aspects of treatment but also emotional well-being. We shall always strive to ensure that each patient receives care that encompasses healing, hope, and the foundations for a healthy future.

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THROUGH PCCM'S ORCHIDS BREAST HEALTH CENTRE (ORCHIDS) IN PUNE, I MEET WOMEN AT VARIOUS STAGES OF LIFE AND DIAGNOSIS. EACH OF THEM HAS FACED A MULTITUDE OF DIFFICULT CHALLENGES AND HAS HAD TO DRAW INNER STRENGTH TO OVERCOME THEM.

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Elaine's story

Elaine Louw / South Africa



In 1979, at the age of 42, I discovered a lump in my left breast while taking a bath before bed. I dried off and rushed to tell my sleeping husband. Being groggy, he mumbled, "Never

mind it, will be gone by tomorrow" and promptly went back to sleep!

Well, "tomorrow" it was still there so I phoned my sister who was a nurse. She told me to consult a doctor without delay. My doctor took a biopsy and the two weeks wait for the result was nerve-

racking. An aunt on both sides of the family had died of breast cancer. I had given birth to and breastfed four children. How could this happen to me?

I remember lying alone and terrified in a three-bed ward on a Sunday. Taking a deep breath, I finally stopped bargaining with God and amazingly I fell into a peaceful sleep for three hours, only waking when two other patients were admitted to the ward.

No matter how others had encouraged me, it was only when the lady from Reach for Recovery visited that I had real assurance. She brought with her a bag of information about how to deal with the after-treatment,

where to obtain prostheses and wigs if necessary, but most importantly, she was a survivor of breast cancer!

The only treatment for me in those days was a course of radiation, five days a week for five weeks. I would go to work, rush to the hospital during my lunch hour, and get back again in time for work.

I registered for a volunteer Cancer Caregiver course when the offices were in Braamfontein, South Africa. Thereafter, I continued with Reach for Recovery in Rosebank. I always assured patients at the outset that I was a survivor for decades. I am now 87 years old.

R. Awaliya's story

Make peace with breast cancer

R. Awaliya / Member of the Indonesian Breast Cancer Foundation's Breast Cancer Survivor Community



It has taken a long time for me to admit to myself what I have been through for the past five years with my breast cancer. Initially, I wanted to make it into a story book

but I found it challenging to put my story into words, and often it only ended up as a draft on my mobile phone. This time, however, I forced myself to write it down. Here is my story.

Since I was a young girl I expected that, by the time I was 23-years old, I would get married, have my own business, or at least have a permanent job. However, something happened that I had never imagined. At the age of 23, I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

At the beginning, I found a lump in my left breast. I had no symptoms or pain. I went to see a medical doctor who advised me to have a biopsy. Of course I agreed, but I never expected anything serious at that time. I was definitely scared, but I never thought it was going to be cancer because I felt fine. Two weeks later, the

results of the biopsy came in. I still clearly remember the result was stated as a "Carcinoma Mamae type Mucinous". The doctor told me it was malignant and immediately referred me to the Dharmais Cancer Hospital in Jakarta for further treatment.

I had a re-examination, but the result was the same. My breast cancer was Stage 1. Do not ask how I felt at that time. Shock? Definitely. The world felt dark; I lost hope and enthusiasm for life. How could I feel so healthy and have breast cancer?

At the time, I underwent various treatments and, even now, I am still taking medication. It felt like an endless journey and I had no idea how long it would last. I hoped that patience and faith would guide me and give me hope.

Because I was so young and my breast cancer was early stage, the oncological surgeon performed a lumpectomy. However, five years later my breast cancer came back and I had to have a mastectomy. I didn't expect my breast cancer to come back when I was still young and not yet married.

I had to take hormone therapy — a tablet every day for another five years — and as

I was still pre-menopausal, I also had to have injections along with the hormone therapy. Unfortunately, it turned out that all the treatments did not give good results. Disappointed? Yes, and I struggle with why it has happened and whether in some way I was responsible for it or, perhaps, it is destiny.

In the past, when reading a book titled "A Small Letter to God", I cried when reading the story of Keke, the protagonist, who was fighting cancer. It said God had chosen Keke to go through cancer, because God knew she would be strong enough to get through it. Now, I cry not only for Keke's story but also for my own, having been diagnosed with breast cancer at an age that I think is relatively young. Mastectomy is indeed difficult. Even two weeks after the surgery, I was reluctant to look at my own body in the mirror. Then, I remembered the verse in which Allah said that "There is no power and no strength except with God", which means that Allah will never give trials beyond the limits of His servant's ability.

Currently, I am trying to accept my situation and make peace with my breast cancer. I strive to continue to live a healthy lifestyle, not think about unimportant things, and love myself. Everything I have gone through illustrates that cancer does not wait for us to become old. It does not wait for us to become weak. Cancer may come at any time, even when we feel fine.

Spotlight on
our members:

Miles of hope, running for a cure: Jamaica Reach to Recovery's mission of advocacy and hope

Sandra A. Samuels, JP, MBA,
President, Jamaica Reach to Recovery



Sandra A. Samuels

In the vibrant heart of the Caribbean, Jamaica Reach to Recovery is championing the fight against breast cancer with a mission embedded in support, education, and awareness. This registered charity, founded in 1977, is composed entirely of breast cancer survivors and has become a beacon of hope for thousands of women and men navigating their cancer journeys. Our organisation is committed to working to improve the quality of life for women and men diagnosed with breast cancer and their families through a wide range of services. Through community-driven initiatives, such as the annual Pink Run, and personalised support at places like the Kingston Public Hospital and the University of the West Indies Hospital (UHWI) Breast Cancer Clinics, the organisation is changing the trajectory of breast cancer care in Jamaica. We believe strongly that no woman or man without financial means should ever be left behind. Although the surgeries and treatments for breast cancer are provided at no charge at the public hospitals, the pretesting that is usually required to start the treatment journey can be very costly and has to be done privately. This includes tests like bone scans, CT scans, mammograms, and ultrasounds. Also, the wait in the public hospitals can be very long due to the overwhelming demand; therefore, due to the urgent nature of a breast cancer diagnosis, many can't wait in line.

Jamaica Reach to Recovery is built on the simple yet universal principle that "a woman or man who has lived through breast cancer and gives freely of their time to help another facing the same experience is a valuable source of support". Members of the group benefit from sharing expertise in breast cancer support, as well as resources, connections, and experiences. We have hybrid

meetings, both in person and via Zoom, on the second Tuesday of each month. A warm welcome awaits all. Join us and "let's continue to do more, until there is a cure".



Start line for 5K at the Emancipation Park, New Kingston, Jamaica, W.I.

Offering Hope Through Counseling

At the heart of Jamaica Reach to Recovery's work is its commitment to emotional and psychological support. A key aspect of this is the counseling provided at the Kingston Public Hospital's Breast Cancer Clinic and the UHWI Hospital, where survivors meet with newly diagnosed patients to offer guidance and a listening ear.

This counseling is vital for patients navigating the initial shock of diagnosis and the challenges that follow. By sharing their own experiences, counselors instill hope and encourage patients to focus on recovery. The organization also works to ensure that patients have access to essential resources, such as prostheses, bras, and support groups, which help them reclaim their confidence and self-image during recovery.

Building a Future of Awareness and Support

In Jamaica, breast cancer remains the leading cancer among women, with 71 cases per 100,000 women, far outpacing other forms of cancer combined. It accounts for 35% of all cancers in women. The late-stage diagnosis of many patients (stages III and IV) highlights the need for greater public education and awareness.

Jamaica Reach to Recovery uses the Pink Run and other initiatives to:

- 1. Promote Early Detection:** Sharing knowledge about breast self-examinations and the benefits of mammography.
- 2. Educate the Community:** Dispelling myths about cancer and encouraging open conversations to reduce fear and stigma.
- 3. Advocate for Policy Change:** Partnering with the Ministry of Health to improve access to affordable screenings, treatments, and medication.

The Pink Run 2024: Miles of Hope

The annual Pink Run/Walk is not just an event; it is a movement. Over the years, it has grown exponentially, with the most recent staging in 2024, our 20th staging, attracting an impressive 11,841 entrants. This record-breaking participation reflects the dedication of survivors, families, corporate sponsors, and the wider community to the cause. This achievement is a testament to the growing commitment of Jamaicans to this vital cause.

The run is more than a fundraiser; it is a platform for raising awareness about the importance of early detection and fostering a sense of solidarity. Participants don pink, symbolising the fight against breast cancer, as they walk or run to honour survivors,

remember loved ones, and advocate for accessible care and resources.

While the run raises significant funds—over J \$10.5 million (US \$68,000) in the last staging—it serves the greater purpose of amplifying the message that early detection saves lives. By engaging the public, the run highlights critical issues such as breast self-examination and the need for accessible mammography, ultimately encouraging a culture of awareness and proactive health care.

This year's record turnout for the Pink Run is a testament to the power of community and the resilience of survivors. Our goal this year is to raise J \$20,000,000 (US \$125,700), which we still hope to realise. Our collections and tallying from our October activities are still ongoing, and we feel confident that we will, at the least, be close to our goal. With increased awareness and continued fundraising, Jamaica Reach to Recovery is determined to save more lives and ensure that no one faces breast cancer alone.

As we look to the future, we remain steadfast in our mission to bring hope and support to all affected by breast cancer in Jamaica. Together, with the energy of our participants and the generosity of our supporters, we are running for a cure and running for change.



Aerial view of the start of the Jamaica Reach to Recovery Pink Run 2024, 11,841 entrants

To donate or learn more about our work, visit:

Website: www.jareachtotherecovery.com
Instagram: @reach2recoveryja
Facebook: Jamaica Reach to Recovery
Call: 1-876-329-9665 / 1-876-978-037



Past President Mrs. Carolind Graham and our 2024 Breast Cancer Month Ambassador survivor Mrs. Kaydia McKoy who was also crowned earlier this year Mrs. Cosmos Queen of Jamaica.

*Testimonial from a Jamaica Reach to Recovery recipient
– Miss Amanda Rochester*

Jamaica Reach to Recovery Team,

“I sincerely thank you for the financial assistance I received. The support has made a significant impact on my life during this challenging time. Your kindness and generosity have truly inspired me. The sisterhood and positive vibes has also made a big difference with my mindset.

With deepest gratitude,”
Amanda Rochester



Survivor Miss Amanda Rochester

Spotlight on
our members:

Pink October in Porto, Portugal

Carolina Negreiros, *Win and Live Movement*

During Pink October, the Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the Win and Live Movement of the Portuguese League against Cancer, Northern Branch, spent the month carrying on multiple activities and participating in many events and initiatives to increase people's awareness of breast cancer. Some highlights of "Pink October" were:



The "IX Pink Lunch", organised by the Win and Live Movement to honor those of have survived and fought breast cancer and raise funds to support breast cancer survivors.



We also participated in sports events and held educational sessions in schools, shopping malls, private institutions and community centers.



The "Ride and Roses Event", a motorcycle ride in Porto: A Celebration of Solidarity and Support. Ride and Roses is more than just a motorcycle ride; it's a tribute to women affected by breast cancer. This event brings together motorcycle enthusiasts and the general community in a gesture of support and solidarity.

Spotlight on
our members:

A miraculous reunion in Kuala Lumpur

Takako Watt, *Founder and President, Breast Cancer Network Japan, (Akebonokai)*

I was feeling exhausted after the night flight from Tokyo to Kuala Lumpur.

The Pinnacle workshop, organised by Rare Cancers Australia in September 2024 in Kuala Lumpur, included twenty or so participants from patient advocacy groups in Japan, Korea and Malaysia. The sessions gave us the opportunity and time to discuss and find solutions to challenges faced by each organisation.

But then a miracle happened. I bumped into my old friend, Ranjit Kaur from Reach to Recovery International. She was one of the facilitators of the workshop sessions. We were meeting after more than 20 years. I couldn't believe my eyes and screamed "Oh You! Ranjit! — Takako!" We screamed with joy and hugged each other. What an unbelievable reunion!

When I began my presentation, I told people about our reunion and said that if you tried to do a good deed every day, you get pleasant surprises as a reward. It was really a miracle. We decided that we must keep in touch from now on.

Thanks to Ranjit, Alebonokai is now reunited with Reach to Recovery International.

“

WHEN I BEGAN MY PRESENTATION, I TOLD PEOPLE ABOUT OUR REUNION AND SAID THAT IF YOU TRIED TO DO A GOOD DEED EVERY DAY, YOU GET PLEASANT SURPRISES AS A REWARD.

”



Ranjit Kaur and Takako Watt

Spotlight on
our members:

Catching up from across the sea

Ranjit Kaur

Malaysia

Violet Pirana, Founder and Director of Renesansa, a Reach to Recovery International group in Kosova met up with Ranjit Kaur, Board Member of Reach to Recovery International at the Patient Advocacy Track at the Congress organised by the European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO) in Barcelona in early September 2024.

Violet was accompanied by her husband who also has a lived experience of cancer.

Interesting topics were presented and discussed at ESMO's Patient Advocacy Track including: challenges in access to new oncology medicines; Immunotherapy: new indications, hopes and perspectives; and the future of cancer via patient expertise in research and innovation projects.



Ranjit and Violet Pirana



THE DESERT CACTI

I learnt from the cacti the secret of life
To survive arid deserts and still to flower.
Draw nectarine water from the earth
Burnt, sandy brown with no shady bower.

Through heat and cold, diurnal struggle
Adaptation is always a strife
Burdened roots, stems and spines
Work hard for the 'manna' of life

Little by little, with resilient calm
A wealth of sap does flow,
From a wild, beautiful desertscape
Blushing cactus flowers grow.

From the desert cacti I too have learnt
To keep life aglow and everything
The joys and pain, hope and loss
Enrich, enhance and poignancy bring.

Rama, 1985 /2024 (Edited)



Global Kitchen

Healthy holiday side dishes from the USA

Green Bean Casserole



PREP TIME: 30 MINUTES / COOK TIME: 20-25 MINUTES / SERVINGS: 8

Ingredients:

2 lbs. (1 kg.) fresh green beans, trimmed and cut in half
 1 medium-sized yellow onion, chopped
 2 cloves garlic, minced
 2 tablespoons flour
 ½ cup (1 stick) butter, divided
 8 oz. (226 grams) white button mushrooms, slices
 3 cups (¾ liter) half-and-half
 Kosher salt or sea salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
 6 oz. (170 grams) /crispy fried onions, divided

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 375° F (190° C) and grease a 9- by 13-inch (23- by 33-cm) baking dish with butter or nonstick spray.
2. Bring 4 quarts (approx. 4 liters) of water to a boil. Add green beans and boil until tender but still crisp, about 4 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, fill a large bowl with ice water. With a slotted spoon, move the green beans into the ice bath to prevent them from cooking further. Set aside.
4. In a large skillet, heat half of the butter over medium/high heat. Add chopped onion and cook until caramelized, about 7–8 minutes, stirring frequently. Add mushrooms and cook until softened, about 4 minutes more. Add garlic and cook one more minute. Transfer mixture to a bowl and set aside.
5. Reduce heat to medium and add remaining butter to skillet. Stir in flour and cook 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Stir in half-and-half, salt, and pepper. Cook until mixture thickens, about 4 minutes.
6. Add green beans, cream sauce, and ½ the crispy fried onions to mushroom mixture. Stir to combine, then pour into prepared baking dish and top with fried remaining crispy fried onions. Bake 20-25 minutes, until sauce is bubbly and top is golden brown. Let stand 5 minutes before serving.

Parmesan Butternut Squash Gratin

Global
Kitchen

Healthy holiday
side dishes from
the USA



PREP TIME: 25 MINUTES / COOK TIME: 50 MINUTES / SERVINGS: 6

Ingredients:

- 1 large butternut squash
- ¼ cup (60 grams) butter or margarine
- 2 large garlic cloves, finely chopped
- ¼ cup (60 grams) panko (Japanese-style) bread crumbs
- ½ cup (78 grams) Parmesan cheese
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ cup (60 grams) fresh parsley (optional)

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 375° F (190° C). Grease a 9- by 13-inch (23- by 33-cm) glass baking dish with butter or cooking spray. Peel and seed squash and chop into cubes, 1-inch (2 ½ cm.) or smaller. Place in bowl.
2. Melt butter in a saucepan over medium heat. Reduce heat to low, then add garlic and cook, stirring frequent, for 2 to 3 minutes until garlic is soft. Do not let butter brown.
3. In a small bowl, mix bread crumbs, cheese, and 1 tablespoon of the butter and garlic mixture.
4. Pour remaining butter and garlic mixture over squash and mix to coat.
5. Transfer squash to prepared baking dish. Sprinkle with bread crumb mixture.
6. Bake uncovered for 30 to 40 minutes until squash is tender. Increase oven temperature to 425° F (218° C) and bake 5 to 10 minutes longer until lightly browned. Before serving, sprinkle parsley over top if desired.