

# I Never Liked Pink . . . and Other Things I Learned From Cancer

WORDS BY

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Cancer has taught me some lessons. First, control is a big fat lie. Second, it is critically important to put on your own “oxygen mask” of self-care before helping others. And finally, fear is just a word.

I grew up with a “feeling” that I would be diagnosed with breast cancer. My grandmother was diagnosed when I was in my late teens, and though we weren’t close in proximity, we were close in spirit. She suffered her first recurrence a decade later, endured more treatment, but the disease soon metastasized, and in 2008, breast cancer took her from me. I was 37 and she was only 74. Though I carried none of the genetic predisposition for the disease, I harbored the fear that I was destined for this same fate.

I wish I had been wrong.

In 2012 at age 41, almost to the exact date of her passing, I heard the words I had foreseen all those years ago, “You have breast cancer.” Frustrated and angry, I questioned why? I had been proactive with mammograms and vigilant with self-care. I thought I was ready if the worst happened, but nothing truly prepares you for when your fear becomes a reality.

Cue my head exploding and my brain shutting down.

My diagnosis was Stage I, slow-growing, ER/PR+ HER2-. My doctor told me this was the “best” type of breast cancer to have as it was

the most treatable. Watching my grandmother battle breast cancer for more than 20 years, I had told my husband, if this ever happens to me, I was 100% in favor of a bilateral mastectomy. But when it came right down to it, I was unable to make that choice. At the time of my diagnosis, my son was 20 months old. In order to lovingly care for him, I did not want to manage the massive recovery process, since my cancer was so treatable. Instead, with my doctor’s recommendation, I opted for a lumpectomy with radiation and five years of tamoxifen. I thought I was done. I was wrong.

January 2017, four years later, a regular mammogram found a new primary occurrence of cancer in my OTHER breast. This changed my life forever. I went after the cancer with a bilateral mastectomy and reconstruction. I also made the choice to have my ovaries and all of the things removed, removing the estrogen makers from my body, but also more things which would contract cancer. Be gone with it all!

After my treatment, I was lost. Who was I now? Yes, a wife and mother, but my body was different and my brain was different. I had no idea what I needed to get my life back, but I knew, I had to do something.

Then one day, I happened to drive by a local organization called *Breast Friends of Oregon*. Their office is, quite literally, a mile from my home. It felt like my grandmother was pointing the way to my new purpose. I ventured in to see what they might need in the way of volunteers.

I had LIVED breast cancer. Twice. I knew that I wanted to become an advocate and help promote awareness, provide information and give support to others who would come after me. When I walked in their door that day, I was surrounded by a support system of women who got it; they are my tribe.

Along with being a volunteer at the office, I began to attend workshops, a retreat at the coast, and events. It was at one event, the *Breast Friends* annual luncheon, that I found my “twinkle.” Dr. Shani Fox, a naturopathic physician and certified life coach, was speaking about taming fear after cancer. She asked the audience, “What would you do with your life if there were no restrictions on time or money and you knew that you could not fail?” Being the over-sharer that I am, I stood up and boldly answered: “I want to be on stage, doing inspirational speaking, and writing a book to help other women manage their journey with breast cancer.” Uhm, what? Where the hell did that come from??

Before my cancer, I had a healthy fear of being on stage. Hearing myself express this new vision lit a fire inside of me that kicked that fear to the curb! I wanted to shout my story from every stage and platform and help as many women as I could. I called my husband on the way home because I was too excited to wait. We talked about my new goals and how to make them happen. We later created a website so I could publish a blog called “I Never Liked Pink.” I started to share my cancer story. Now, I spill it all... nothing is off limits.

I began as a volunteer at *Breast Friends* in 2017; now I am an official employee, with the title Patient Programs Assistant. My role has included helping start the Young Warrior program of support, organizing the Hat Project that sends thousands of humorous, encouraging hats around the country to women who have lost their hair through chemotherapy, being a keynote speaker at various events and activities, and working closely with patients as they connect with the *Breast Friends* programs of support.

Earlier this year, I was blessed to inherit an amazing platform of advocacy from our Co-Founder Becky Olson, who lost her fifth battle with cancer in April. I am now the host of the weekly *Breast Friends Cancer Support Network* podcast. During each episode, I talk with a variety of guests

on topics ranging from survivorship and how to deal with trauma to sex after cancer. I’m continually searching for items of interest for all stages and ages of the cancer experience. I also weave in fabulous interviews with other warrior women, allowing them to share their stories, how their lives have changed for the better in spite of cancer, and how they are helping others. Of course, I manage to talk about myself in the episodes, how I made it through, and how I am working to improve lives of those who have traveled a similar journey.

And I am working on a memoir/advice book about what I have learned since cancer first touched my life as a teenage girl! I’m calling it “I Never Liked Pink . . . and Other Things I Learned From Cancer.”

I love what I do and will continue to move forward, helping others along the way. I am a changemaker. ♡