

Laurie's Story



A NINE-YEAR
SURVIVOR
OF BREAST
CANCER
CHRONICLES
HER
CONTINUING
JOURNEY

I know what it feels like to bust a gut. I'd done so many times before in fits of laughter and craziness, but never did my gut actually burst from it. I was sitting at my computer, on the phone with a good friend, laughing, and my rib just broke. I'm 38 going on 80.

I'm a nine-year survivor of breast cancer. My godchildren have played an enormous role in my original diagnosis and first recurrence. Not being a mother, I've often thought this connection was beyond extraordinary. In 1997, I was holding my 4-month-old godchild, Chiara, in my arms when her head rocked against a hard lump in my left chest. It was diagnosed as intraductal/invasive carcinoma.

Four years later, while playing with my fourth godchild, Carmel, then 6 months old, she leaned on that same spot, and I shot to the ceiling in pain. Chest wall recurrence.

A year later, in summer of 2003, I was leveled again when I learned it had metastasized to my liver and several bones, including my spine. No child brought this information to me; the pain of searing bones sent the message loud and clear.

I can only characterize bone pain by saying it feels like a shotgun has been nudged into your spine, and while nestled deep, fires off several rounds of chaos. It's a creepy fire burning at the core of your bone. It has astonishing depth, steadiness and fortitude. For me, it was far worse than surgery. It continues to be the deepest darkest pain I have ever known.

The reminder of pain is a good indication that you can feel, but feeling this pain made me numb. Even around-the-clock pain management drugs never fully knocked it out, and I worried constantly about stumbling and falling.

I was at a party this past winter when suddenly I had to lean against a table to keep my balance. Those drugs make you higher than Keith Richards in a tree. Worse yet, you are served the most wretched side dish of all, constipation. Still, the bone metastasis keep coming, three years later, month after month, sometimes with a sigh, sometimes with a bellow.

To watch your own body break down while you are in your thirties is to live in exasperated anxious despair. I was always a strong girl; I used to play football with neighborhood boys. I did not just run in circles while they played; I was a wide receiver. My brother broke me in by teaching me how to fight back, how to throw and take a punch. Remember those pants called Toughskins circa 1980? That

was me—unstoppable, unbreakable.

When I was 18, I hiked 100 miles into the Chugach Mountains in Alaska with an 80-pound backpack. When I was 34, I ran a 5K race, bald and bloated on the chemotherapy drug Taxol. I was tough. And yet, not tough enough to beat cancer.

Living life in stage 4 diagnosis meant every day was a slow and sickening progression of steps to the end. Regardless of what glorious institution I frequented, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital in New York City, the Cancer Treatment Centers of America, esteemed doctor

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after doctor assured me, sometimes glibly, that my life was in great jeopardy.

In a way, I couldn't have cared less. I was sick, heartbroken and sometimes too tired to go on. I felt my life was no longer in my hands. I forgive myself now for my response then. At that time my business sense was thrown way off by being unable to work or travel. I was a weak patient, not an assertive consumer. But regardless of that, they lost me at "hello." They offered myriad of expensive treatments, with no guarantees.

My wonderful parents literally carted me through several hundred appointments, where they listened carefully and took notes, while I was humming elevator music and watching mouths move. Denial baby! Not so bad after all. Living life as a cancer patient has its obvious hardships, but it's peppered with great comedy. Nothing is more hilarious than being seven feet off the ground on a glass radiation table surrounded by caring, singsong technicians whom you might mistake for being on Broadway rather than in a radio oncology center.

I will always admire the incredibly caring nurses from the Radio Oncology Center at University Hospital at SUNY Upstate who strive to make life not only bearable, but also enjoyable for their patients, regardless of the despair that permeates that building. To me, they are the bright side. After years of living as a full-time patient, my doctors are family to me, my nurses and radiation technicians like sisters and brothers. It's hard to be in a good mood when you're sick, but joy was always getting my attention. I owe that to my faith.

Two years ago my mother took me to Lourdes, France, with the Order of Malta, to attend its annual religious pilgrimage. I had attended years earlier as a volunteer and was assigned to a "malade" or a person who is ill, for six days. Now I was going as a malade. I was humiliated and dejected to be among the rank of the sick and dying. More than anything, I prayed to God, asking to cure my weak, sick body. If I could be physically well, I could live my life again.

When in Lourdes, at the massive Domain of the Blessed Virgin Mother, I pleaded with her for my health. I went in the baths, drank the water, made my penance over and over, symbols for which to be granted health again. Thousands of people processed around the Domain with candles and hearts aglow, rosaries swaying when they walked, all living the little miracles in their lives.



I was inundated with not just religious people but spiritual, touched hearts, filled with love. They showed me how to lift my hands and praise God through my circumstances. It was then I realized God comes to us in the form of other people. It was then I realized my heart was sick, not my body. Mine was a miracle of the heart. I climbed a mountain with my mother that day, emotionally and physically. My will to live wasn't enough, I had to give my illness, my pain, and my torture over to God fully, completely, and let go of all my relentless wishing. I was no longer afraid to die. Life since has never been the same.

Shortly after I returned home from Lourdes last year, I received a strange e-mail from a woman I had known only casually. It said: 'The time has come for me to share some thoughts of mine with you and to begin some energy work. I can do this only if you feel that this is appropriate and only if you feel 'right' about it. It needs to be at my home, and I was even shown the place. I'd prefer you not share this with anyone at this time.'



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I was intrigued, but confused by this. My friend is a chief executive officer and runs a very well respected business in our town. Up until this morning, all we shared was mutual respect, a few years of casual friendship and some laughs along the way. We didn't hang out socially, nor did we see each other often. I agreed to meet. My heart filled with excitement and thrill for no real reason.

When I arrived at her house that Tuesday, she was walking on the front lawn. Her smiling, waving self practically dwarfed the big house behind her. My friend is very fit, with an inordinate amount of concentrated focused energy and vigor. By the time I parked, she had already been in through the front door, changed shoes, and walked through her house to meet me in the garage.

Immediately, details started flying out of her about her life, her gifts, her sights, and her ability to fathom a higher reality. She had burning palms and visions. She was rising out of her seat and sitting back and then rising back in a fury of faith, love and more love. Her hands and arms were gesturing about the room, animating every detail of her story. The angels had asked her to heal me, to practice Reiki, a spiritual laying of hands on my weak body. I was enraptured, and though her lecture was bizarre, out of this world and manic, I believed every word. I sat, locked and loaded, enthralled by her. Later that day she did Reiki on me, and as I watched, flashes of colors swirling behind my closed eyes, I couldn't explain what I felt, but I knew it was better than before. For the past year, almost averaging on weekly, she has interrupted her busy day to give me Reiki, and each time, something incredible has happened. I have a hard time understanding it to this day. The last Reiki

we shared was mind blowing. When the hour was up, I felt a crushing headache, intense nausea, and crippled in pain. She was smiling the whole time. This, she said, was good.

I spent that entire day, with an ice pack on my head, and my stomach swirling. The very next day, I felt amazing. Something indeed was released. It was no coincidence that my prayers a month earlier in Lourdes had brought me to her. She was truly sent from God and I was being healed.

The aftermath of my Lourdes experience has created a synergy for healing in every aspect of my life. I'm not beyond waking up in the middle of the night, frozen with fear, but those moments remind me that it's a daily exercise to release this fear. It takes a lifetime to do it right.

I feel very fortunate that I was introduced to Dr. George Wong, a researcher at the Strang Cancer Prevention Center in New York City, whose Chinese herbal tea and intense acupuncture has breathed new life into my deteriorating body. I have visited him every month for the past four years, and I owe him a debt of gratitude. Dr. Wong is beyond words. He is a lifesaver and a friend.

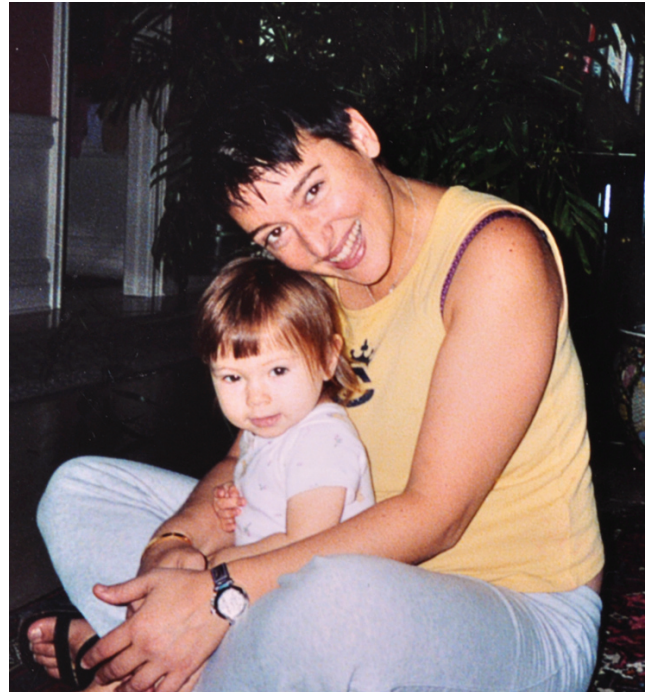
Often I speak to breast cancer survivors and newly diagnosed patients. I strive to remind them that survivorship is a multifaceted approach. Chemotherapy and radiation are small components of what is now apparent to me as the big picture. You have to be willing to soften your heart, release your stress, and open your mind to what is offered to you. After Lourdes, I believe firmly that anyone or anything that comes into your path in your lifetime has great meaning, if you allow it to carry you.

I wince at all the opportunities I may have dismissed over time, opportunities which may have presented more than I could have known. Today I still have to remind people around me to hug me gently; my bones have been through unbelievable stress. Although I am feeling stronger every day, a simple loving squeeze from a hug will rock me to my knees. I've endured a long, drawn-out and tiring experience with breast cancer. But I've also experienced an evolution within my crisis. It's a long road down, but an even longer road back up.



Today I move to my own beat, and lest someone try to conduct my symphony of sympathy, empathy and compassion, I wave my magic wand and they disappear. For in Lourdes, I learned that those who suffer are suffering for those who cannot, and that we who suffer are considered by the Roman Catholic Church as blessed. I have gone through the gauntlet of fear and sorrow, and fear and pain, and the unknown, and am still here to smile. It's a beautiful life.

Laurie Mezzalingua of Fayetteville, is a 1986 graduate of Manlius Pebble Hill School and a 1990 graduate of Boston University. She is the founder of the Saint Agatha Foundation, named for St. Agatha, patroness against breast diseases. The foundation benefits underserved breast cancer patients and their health care solutions. It is dedicated to providing clinical, surgical or diagnostic services, outreach, screening, prevention, treatment or support.



Mezzalingua was the president of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation for two years and served on its board for six years. She also chaired the Race for the Cure event twice, and in 2005, was honored with the national Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation Outstanding Volunteer Award. She was also named the 2005 Citizen of the Year by Temple Adath Yeshurun and was the 2006 commencement speaker at Manlius Pebble Hill School.