

# WOMEN OF BREAST CANCER

Survivors talk about the disease, pushing for early detection

BY RENÉE NOVELLE

“**T**he last words I heard were, ‘You have breast cancer.’” Bridget Howard’s expression still reflects the pain of her diagnosis. “I didn’t hear anything the doctor said after that.” Eyes flushed red with restrained tears, the 37-year-old single mom thought immediately of her then 7-year-old son. “He was still getting over the divorce and being separated from his dad, so it was a double whammy for him adjusting to all of this.”

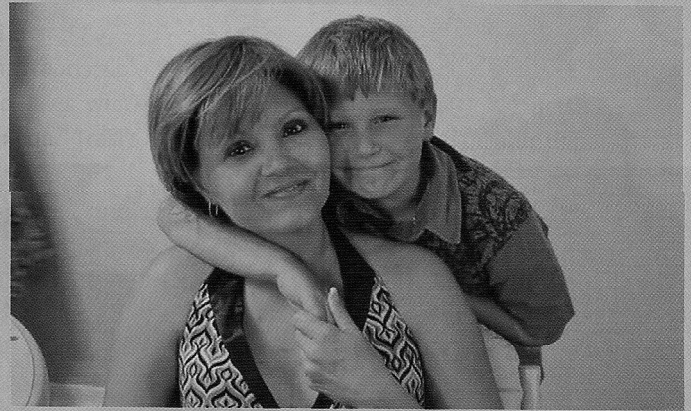
In recent years, the nation has been pink-washed in a flood of efforts meant to raise breast cancer awareness and provide education on the disease. But it’s easy to throw out the statistics, never thinking it could affect someone in your community—or even your own family.

Until it actually happens.

Breast cancer in modern America affects hundreds of thousands of women every year—including the nearly 41,000 who ultimately lose their battle completely. And even in Southwest Florida, Howard’s experience with the disease is but one of thousands. “I think my situation was a little different because I felt a lump. But I felt it two years prior,” she says.

Though Howard had been complaining to her physician about it since she was 35, he ignored her symptoms and denied her a mammogram, she says. Finally, her pain necessitated the exam. “It’s honestly not as bad as you think,” Howard says of the mammogram myth. “That’s the big facade, that it’s painful. Childbirth is painful. Mammograms are nothing compared to that.”

What followed her diagnosis was a double mastectomy and four heavy rounds of chemotherapy that left her struggling to function.



“The first one kicked my butt; I was in bed for almost a week,” says Howard, who lives in Fort Myers. Her hair soon began falling out and she realized she would have to wear a wig. “I went to my sister’s house and we shaved my head. My dad wanted his shaved; I cried shaving his.” Tears threaten to flow again at the memory. “I learned how to put makeup on with no eyelashes or eyebrows. You don’t realize how much you miss your eyelashes, until you don’t have them.”

The age issue that may have prevented Howard from getting an earlier mammogram seems to be a hot topic these days. Though recent recommendations from the United States Preventative Services Task Force suggest starting mammograms at age 50, many highly regarded organizations—the American College of Radiology, the Society for Breast Imaging and the national Comprehensive Cancer Network—each maintain that mammograms should begin

Bridget Howard (above) says doctors delayed diagnosis for possible breast cancer. At age 37 she underwent surgery and chemotherapy. Son Colt made the journey with his mom. The Radiology Regional Center Mobile Coach (below) helps those with busy schedules.





Tina Gilbert (left) was diagnosed with cancer at age 41. Husband Mark was there every step. 3-D mammography (middle) is less painful than other preventive treatments. Dr. Mary Kay Peterson (right) is director of Women's Imaging at Radiology Regional Center. Early cancer detection helped Marie Springsteen (below). She's the founder of the 4 Words Foundation in Cape Coral.

at 40. In fact, the American Cancer Society reports that one in eight invasive breast cancers are found in women younger than 45. "I was 37 when I was going in for chemo treatments, another lady there was 30 years old," says Howard, who still appears shaken by the discovery. "She had a baby. That's the only reason she found it... she was breast-feeding. Recommendations saying women shouldn't get screened until 50 scare the crap out of me."

Tina Gilbert, diagnosed just after turning 41, agrees. "When I hear the recommendations of age 50, it makes me cringe. I can't imagine what my life would've been like if I'd waited until 50 to get a mammogram," she says.

Prior to her diagnosis, Gilbert considered herself active and normal in every way. And after years working in the medical industry, she assumed she was well educated on disease. "I'm your normal, every-day person who never really thought it'd happen to me," the Cape Coral woman says. After her diagnosis, Gilbert endured six surgeries. "No one ever tells you what could go wrong. And I had just about everything that could go wrong happen to me," she says.

Still, Gilbert has found a silver lining. "I was able to interact better with my patients... I try to calm them and remind them I'm still here. That's why we stress early detection, because we're obviously not going to prevent breast cancer at this point. But if we can catch it early enough, you may not have to go through all that."

One health agency striving to lessen cancer's impact is Radiology Regional Center, a Lee County physician-owned care firm. Among its programs, it provides a mobile mammogram service to screen busy workers and those in remote communities. "The mission of the [Mobile Mammo] coach is to make sure that women are taking care of their own health, because early detection does save lives," says Renee Palin. She is the program's director, and believes some women skip annual visits when schedules get too hectic. "If you are a career woman and you can barely make your annual physical with your primary care doctor, adding on that annual mammogram may be just too much in your schedule."

But every statistic and health expert recommends annual checkups. "Skipping that annual mammogram could almost be

a death sentence," Palin says. "It's amazing to me the number of cancers we detect at their earliest and most treatable stage."

It was the Radiology Regional Center team that first discovered Marie Springsteen's cancer in 2012. "I started getting mammograms when I was in my early 20s," she says. "We found it very early and were able to get it treated," adding that early detection helped in avoiding more serious consequences. It was also the catalyst for her nonprofit project, the 4 Words Foundation, which provides education and financial assistance to patients with any type of cancer in Southwest Florida. "I think our ability to remain alive now is so much greater than it was many years ago. So I don't see breast cancer anymore as a death sentence," Springsteen says.

Gilbert agrees. "You won't think of yourself down the road as 'I have breast cancer.' It will be 'I had breast cancer.' It will become a memory." ❧

*Renee Novelle is a journalist and author enjoying beautiful Southwest Florida.*



## NEED TO KNOW

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