

The Pink Party Introduction

I have already had one bout with breast cancer and often wonder what I would do if it came back for Round Two. I'd like to think we would pummel the crap out of each other and I'd win but, setting bravado aside, how well would I cope, really?

The initial encounter was life-changing and learning to live with the fear of its return has been an important part of my recovery. If breast cancer does put on the boxing gloves again, I hope I can give it a run for its money and live a happy and full life in spite of it.

Hope is the desire for something with confidence in the possibility of its fulfilment. Hope accompanies a woman when she is diagnosed with breast cancer, finding a pathway for her – the hope for positive results, the hope that a particular chemotherapy regime will work well, the hope for a full and happy life and, if treatment yields little or no progress against the disease, hope for acceptance and a peaceful way. The stories of women who have gone before inspire us, infusing us with the hope and strength that they held for themselves.

In 2005, I had the privilege of walking with two women, Manon and Colleen, as they faced challenges with their breast cancers. Both women made life-changing decisions about their treatment and care, approaching difficult issues with dignity and determination. They never lost the joy of living in the moment, even if happiness was elusive some days, or in small measure on others, and they never gave up hope.

Colleen was in the final stages of her journey with metastatic breast cancer at that time. She would often say how alone she felt with her disease, even though she was surrounded by love and support. She wanted to talk to another woman who was experiencing life with advanced breast cancer. Unfortunately this did not happen so Colleen decided to share her story, hoping

the words would bring some comfort, a sense of fellowship and strength to others in the same predicament.

Cancer returned for Manon in 2005. She had survived inflammatory breast cancer five years earlier only to be diagnosed with a Grade II ductal cancer. She was faced with making those difficult decisions that would offer her the best chance of long-term survival. I witnessed her courage, hope, humour and positivity in the midst of so much adversity, and was humbled by it.

Manon is one of the Cancer Babes, the group of women I met at the Auckland Cancer Society's CanSurvive course. To say she is an inspiration is to understate the strength of a woman who overcame an aggressive and rare form of breast cancer. Manon loves her life, she adores it, grabs it with both hands and never lets go. I often grasp her coat tails and go along for the ride, and wow, what a ride! She has helped me learn about life in the moment – that knees-up, hands in the air, champagne-cork-blowing spontaneity of it – those moments that bring joy, happiness and fun. I laugh with Manon, smile a lot, feel good about myself when I am with her, and know that I can do just about anything because she absolutely believes that I can.

Colleen passed away two years ago today and not a week goes by that I don't think of her. She enters my mind on a waft of pink and sunshine with a hibiscus bloom tucked behind her ear. Sometimes, one of the ladies in our breast cancer support group will say, 'Remember that amazing woman who used to come to our group with her pink walking stick? She always had it decorated with flowers.'

I can feel the warmth and joy of Colleen's life, the sense of humour that never left her, the boisterous laugh, her love for a good party and most of all, her absolute determination to keep going in spite of it all.

Colleen helped me understand that the will to live is powerful and life can be very simple. Being able to go down the driveway and into her garden was not only a major accomplishment but it filled her with a happiness and pleasure she hadn't experienced in so long.

'I have time to stop and smell the roses now,' she would say.

Manon has taught me about 'living in the moment', how to be spontaneous and how to be brave. She is often asked what she did to survive inflammatory breast cancer and how she coped with cancer's return and she replies,

'I embraced my joyous life.'

Auckland, June 30th 2007

© Jane Bissell
Klarer Lasserre Books 2007