

WILDFIRE

Five Years & Counting

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OF BREAST CANCER, ALL STAGES.

When Two Worlds Collide

WORDS BY

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My friend Lisa died from metastatic breast cancer this past August. Although I have lost a lot of people I care about to this disease, losing Lisa was different. I should say here that Lisa and I were not close friends. We had known each other only for a short period of time, but her influence on my life was as meaningful as that of some friends I have known for decades.

Lisa, without knowing it, relieved my inner conflict. I had felt as if I were living my life caught between two worlds – living my life as two different people: a thriver and a survivor. You see, as an early-stage survivor, I have spent the past five plus years working with, and on behalf of, women living with MBC.

There was thriver me, the one living in the present and excitedly planning the future, opening doors with hope and anticipation. I knew how privileged I was to be alive and present for my three daughters. I was thankful I could be a part of their beautiful futures. My heart would overflow with gratitude that I would be able to witness them enter each new chapter of their lives from high school and college to careers and families.

Despite the hope and positivity I felt as a thriver, the survivor in me was a bit darker. This half of me knew all too well that 30% of early-stage survivors will receive an MBC diagnosis at some point in their life. This part of me would sometimes be triggered by a smell, a memory, or a situation that would leave me feeling helpless and immediately transport me back to when I was a cancer patient. Hairless, maimed, and broken.

Bringing these two worlds together is my fourth “child,” the one I have nurtured since its birth in 2018: Infinite Strength. Guiding this nonprofit and doing this work had been indescribably fulfilling, and I was just getting started. Thriving and Surviving. But this had left me with the dilemma of both embracing and questioning at the same time. Was survivorship a constant, painful collision of the past and the present? Was it a battle of knowing what I wanted my future to look like but being afraid to hope?

The survivor in me was so deeply entwined with the women that Infinite Strength supports. They were always in my thoughts. Their pain and their struggles kept me up at night. Why did I do this to myself? Why did I put myself in a position to live in “Cancerworld” when I had been given a clean bill of health? Why did I keep reminding myself of what could have happened or what could still happen? Why did survivor me not look for the exit? Close the door and never look back? But this part of me also knew I never would.

This is where Lisa entered my life.

On a random summer day in 2021 I answered my phone to hear Lisa’s cheerful voice on the other end. We got acquainted with each other and made plans to work together on a panel discussion Infinite Strength was hosting. In the middle of the conversation she said, “I am so glad you are doing this work because we need you! Those of us living with MBC need you! We are the ones working so hard to educate others about this disease, fighting for

better care and better outcomes, but we are also fighting for our lives and we are going to die! We need early-stage allies like you to continue the work when we cannot.”

I was stunned into silence for two reasons. The first was that she talked about dying with such utter acceptance. There were no tearful cries, her voice did not even lower an octave. Acceptance. Her tone conveyed acceptance, and I wondered how that was possible. The second thought was that I had never heard the term “early-stage ally” and it took me by surprise that she described my work in this way. Early. Stage. Ally. Those three words stuck with me long after that telephone conversation ended, and I began to use them when describing the work of Infinite Strength. As I write this, those three small words fill me with great pride because the definition of the word ally means: One that is associated with another as a helper: A person or group that provides assistance and support in an ongoing effort, activity or struggle.

Thanks to Lisa, I began to realize that I might have been looking at survivorship in the wrong way. Once Lisa and I began working together, I took every opportunity I could over the course of the next year to learn from her, to follow her, to be worthy of advocating on behalf of amazing women like her – women living while dying. And as I led Infinite Strength through the remainder of 2021 and into 2022, as we grew from a New England nonprofit to an East Coast nonprofit, as we set a goal to become national by 2024, it has been that initial conversation with Lisa that replays in my head. It is

her voice and her words propelling me. And it is her words that helped me find peace. Bad things happen to good people all the time. I don’t know what my future will bring, but I do know I am here now and healthy, and it is a privilege to be a helper. I will not lose sight of that again.

When I received the text that Lisa had died, I sat and cried alone at my kitchen table. It wasn’t that I did not know the end was near. Always thinking of others, she had prepared everyone well. But August 2022 was just too soon for her light to be extinguished. How is it possible that someone I knew for only a little over a year could come to mean so much to me? How was she ever going to know the impact she had on me or the peace of mind she helped me find? I guess the real question is, “How lucky am I to have had her in my life for even a short time?” She was a gift!

I no longer feel as if I live in two worlds; as if I am two different people. I actually feel quite at peace with who I am and my choice to make cancer my life’s work. I have reframed my idea of survivorship. It is no longer a heavy weight but a badge of honor. It is not a collision but a melding, a melding of my past and my present and my hopes and goals for the future. And I have Lisa to thank for that. ♡



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