

## **THE DEBRA LACHANCE STORY**

I wanted to ask the people around me, “Would you please raise your hand if you feel as isolated as I do?”

Walking the busy streets of Manhattan on a beautiful sunny day, I was surrounded by people but I’d never felt so alone. Just minutes before, my doctors had broken the news to me that I had a particularly aggressive form of breast cancer.

Since moving to New York from a small town in Rhode Island, I’d had my share of ups and downs but had always risen to the challenges that living and working in New York can bring. But on this summer afternoon, I felt as if the world was suddenly rushing past me while I moved in slow motion along the crowded sidewalk, wondering how I was going to tell my twin sister Denise that I had cancer.

My sister and I are as close as only twins can be: she is my best friend, my greatest support, my closest confidante. She was always at my side as I built successful businesses in fashion, technology, and real estate. We had faced challenges together in the past, but cancer was new territory. I thought that telling my loved ones would be worse than hearing it myself.

But with a life of love and support behind us and uncertainty ahead, Denise and I did what we had always done when faced with trouble: we cried and then we got to work. There was much to do and a short amount of time in which to do it: specialists to consult; doctors to interview; treatment plans to decide upon; hospitals to find. All the while the clock was ticking, urging me forward. As an entrepreneur, that’s what I’d always done in my life. But there was a special urgency to this that made my day-to-day businesses pale in comparison. This job wouldn’t allow a day off.

We made progress finding out about the disease and how best to treat it. But I could not shake the sense of aloneness I felt from the moment I received my diagnosis. I needed to hear from other people who had gone through what I had, who truly understood what it meant and who might be able to help. I wasn’t ready for a regular support group and with surgery and treatment looming, I simply didn’t have the time. But I am an avid reader and I assumed that finding the personal stories of those who had gone through this ordeal before me would be relatively easy. But finding what I needed turned out to be hard: where were the *real people* to talk to? Where were the books that weren’t just about the science of the disease but about the emotional turmoil, the impact of the disease on every aspect of one’s life?

There was one book that gave me great comfort, *Just Get Me Through This* by Deborah Cohen and Robert A. Gelfand. It was a personal, rather than a clinical story and it sparked in me a desire for more stories that get to the heart of the emotional experience, that help the reader through it. In my limited time talking with other breast cancer patients, I knew there were countless others out there who needed to tell their stories—and to hear the stories of others as well. I decided that part of my own, ongoing healing process would be to find a way to bring people like me together, to create some kind of connection, where these real stories could be shared.

But first I had to find the doctors who would make the physical healing possible. As Denise and I did the research about the disease and its treatment, one doctor’s name kept repeating: Dr. Alexander

Swistel, Director of the Weill Cornell Breast Center at Weill Medical College at Cornell University. After meeting with him I knew he would be the one. It was scary enough to go through this at all, let alone do it with a surgeon who didn't make me feel as comfortable as possible. Dr. Swistel put me at my ease, gave me confidence and made me feel that I was in good hands.

I also felt instant rapport with my oncologist, Ellen Gold. Dr. Gold was frank and honest, while leaving me room to express my concerns. For many cancer patients, between diagnosis and the start of treatment there's little time to bring up feelings, much less have them addressed. The whole process moves so quickly the patient can feel as if she's being run through a healthcare assembly line with no chance to even firmly attach names to the faces of the many medical professionals responsible for her care. Dr. Gold always made me feel that there was time.

At first, what got me through that process were the little lies I told myself that allowed me to believe I would get through this. I'd seen my pathology report and I devoured all the literature on the disease, selecting the information that put the most positive "spin" on my condition. There's so much information out there, so many statistics, reports and findings that I could always find something to latch onto that would allow me to continually push the scariest possibilities away.

But the initial pathology report was wrong. The corrected report I received soon after the first indicated the highest presence of Her-2 (human epidermal growth factor receptor), which results in significantly worse survival rates in patients because its presence can lead to an intense proliferation of cancer cells. Time stood still for me as I read this new report and in that stillness I finally felt the full impact of my diagnosis. It was then that denial stopped working: I knew I'd need chemotherapy. Like so many women, the thought of losing my hair to chemotherapy brought it all crashing home, and as it is with many other patients, it was my turning point. Hitting that hard wall of reality, the time had come to finally face it and fight... or not.

I chose to fight, and in making that choice my vision of community crystallized and *The Healing Project* was born. I'd already realized that having access to the real stories of real people would make the journey through breast cancer much easier to endure. My thoughts kept returning to that walk through Manhattan after I'd heard my diagnosis and that feeling I had of terrible loneliness. As sympathetic as friends and loved ones could be, I felt that no one could truly understand this journey except those who had walked in the same shoes. As my surgery drew closer, I became convinced that getting and giving courage, comfort, and strength were as important as good medical care and I became determined to help build a community for people like me who were undergoing the terribly isolating experience of dealing with a life-threatening disease. This would be *The Healing Project's* mission: to become a bridge across which people can make those all-important emotional connections. And talk about emotional connection: when I told Dr. Gold about the project, her eyes actually welled up with tears.

The hardest moment I had was when I had to leave Denise behind at the door of the operating room. But Doctor Swistel actually came out and walked me in. What a blessing. He even called me from his vacation later to check up on how I was doing. I had a second operation after the first failed to clear the margins of my cancer, then sixteen weeks of chemotherapy every two weeks followed by radiation, every day for seven weeks. I lost my hair in the first three weeks. I didn't want to watch as it came out in clumps until it was all gone, so I went out and had it shaved off. And with this reality of the disease giving me a yardstick to measure my priorities, I felt fine about it: it gave me another task I could do for myself,

rather than just sitting around and waiting. Staying as active, and as proactive, as possible was very important to me. Throughout the ordeal I didn't stop working and went about my life with as much zeal as my varying energies would allow.

Following radiation, Dr. Gold told me that my biomarkers indicated I was a candidate for the new drug Herceptin which targets Her-2 and which had shown remarkable success in patients with aggressive breast cancer. Since the first round of chemo had caused damage to my heart and heart damage is also a possible side effect of the use of Herceptin, I needed to be monitored during the treatments. If good things come in threes, my cardiologist, Doctor Allison Spatz, was my third miraculous doctor. She paid close attention to my case and when she went off my insurance plan in the middle of my treatment, she actually refused to take payment for her work! I ultimately took Herceptin for a year with good results.

During chemotherapy, Dr. Gold also encouraged my interest in exploring alternative and complementary treatment, including herbal mixtures and vitamin supplements. This, in combination with traditional medicine, did indeed help me. I know some people don't believe in the holistic approach, but for me I want to believe it worked. My immune system was pumped up when it should have been down and I didn't get the flu like so many other people in New York that season. To me, that's an important point about dealing with cancer: it comes down to what you choose to believe. There are so many people with so many opinions and there are so many variables to consider. Ultimately, you have to do what's right for yourself, realize that you're not as alone as you might feel, and seek out the people who know best what it's like to be you.

And those are the people I want to help me build *The Healing Project* community. In addition to my daily work during my treatments and during my second round of chemotherapy, I began to develop *The Healing Project* as a place where people can contribute funds for research, time for connecting with and mentoring others and, most of all, a place to share their stories. Since then, *The Healing Project* has been collecting stories by those touched by breast cancer and other diseases for books like this one: books that inspire and inform for the road ahead and impart a sense of community for those caught up in dealing with the moment. When you're sick or afraid, it's a godsend to know that there are others who understand. The stories we received from all over the country and beyond gave me exactly what I thought had been missing: personal stories that are a companion for patients, their friends, and families, an oasis where they can find strength in shared experiences.

In addition to the books, we're also working on other initiatives through *The Healing Project*, including the Companion Network®, a "virtual support group" which will allow patients, family, and friends to connect with others online in real time. I don't want anyone to have to feel the way I did that day of my diagnosis when I was walking through the city alone and afraid. There's so much strength in others—you just have to find them. I think of the people who were here for me: Denise, Doctor Gold, Doctor Swistel, and Doctor Spatz and I realize how fortunate I was to have people who were willing to give of themselves and their time. The healing begins with giving to others.

So *The Healing Project* is part of my own healing, a signpost on my road ahead. And looking ahead, friends ask me if I consider myself cancer free. I choose not to. "The Big C" gives me something tangible with which I can measure my life. I guess I can't help being an entrepreneur, so I see the experience of cancer as an opportunity, with its own list of "Big C's":

To show Courage in the face of so much challenge.

- To accept Caring as it comes.
- To take Comfort from others.
- To know it is OK to Complain.
- To stay Connected with those you love.
- To share with the Community your smiles, tears and fears.
- To be Constant in your ability to rise above but never feel guilty when you can't.
- To build Character for when you come out on the other side.
- To Create kinship with others not as lucky as you.
- To say I Can.
- To say I Cannot.
- To opt for Plan "C" if you must.
- To take Control of your diagnosis and become your own advocate.
- To believe in a Cure, if only for your heart.
- To make Choices that you can live or die with.

Finally, with cancer you have to be ready to chart a new Course, for the rest of your life, no matter what the outcome. And it helps to see that others are busy charting their own courses along with you. That's what these stories are all about. Reading these amazing contributions to The *Voices Of* series convinces me that I don't really have a uniquely remarkable story at all.

The truth is *everyone* does.