



OUT THE OTHER SIDE
STORIES OF
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVAL



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STORIES OF BREAST CANCER SURVIVAL

‘Out the Other Side: Stories of Breast Cancer Survival’ is a collection of individual real-life stories of women who have survived breast cancer. It is designed to offer hope and support to other survivors or women living with the disease in Ireland.

All of the women featured are living proof that it is possible not only to come out the other side of a breast cancer diagnosis, but to thrive and grow after it.

Each story comprises three elements: a shared personal experience of surviving breast cancer; a photograph of each survivor as they are today; and a photograph shared by these women that they feel represents their ‘survivorship milestone’, essentially, what surviving breast cancer has meant for each of these women.

You will read stories of elation and anti-climax, which are happy and sad, funny and irreverent, and filled with confusion, guilt and gratitude. But they are all real. Because just like breast cancer, we know that no survivor’s journey is the same.

Our hope is that this campaign and the stories shared will be a source of comfort and hope to women at various stages of their cancer journey. We hope they will encourage others to seek help and support to understand how cancer may have affected them and give them the tools to rebuild and enjoy their lives.

ASHLEY COFFEY, 42
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 2005

Ashley was diagnosed in 2005. She had a lumpectomy 10 days before Christmas and a repeat surgery in January 2006. She started chemotherapy in March 2006, followed by radiation treatment and brachytherapy. Nine years later, she was diagnosed with a second primary breast cancer tumour. She underwent a mastectomy and chemotherapy.



My life was kick-started when my breast cancer came back nine years after my first diagnosis. I wasn't going to sit around and let cancer consume me. If it wanted me, it could chase me.

I started a countdown to chemo challenge and tried to fit in as many things as possible before chemo started. I never travelled as much as I would have liked to so, with my family and friends, I just started throwing darts at a map and off we'd go. Ryanair became our best friend. We went to Barcelona, Amsterdam, Marrakesh and Portugal.

And, because I wasn't physically unwell during the treatment, the countdown to chemo challenge continued right through chemotherapy. I'd get a heparin flush every three weeks and then I was off. Immersing myself in foreign cultures kept me focused and upbeat.

I went to the see The Cure in London, which was a big treat for a former Cure-head. I went to Rome with my son.

As the chemotherapy was coming to an end, I asked my consultant if I could go to Dubai before my last session. He took some persuading, but I promised I'd stop off in Istanbul for a few days to break up the trip.

It was fantastic. I landed in Dublin from Dubai the night before my last chemo session.

I got cancer but I definitely got the travel bug as well.

My children were and still are my driving force. When my treatment was over, my youngest son and I went on a celebration

trip to the US because he had gone through this journey with me. We had a special sleepover at the Natural History Museum in New York, with nothing but a torch and sleeping bags and about 30 other people. We got to run through the halls in the middle of the night looking for Dum Dum and we got to sleep under that famous big blue whale in the lobby. It was a once in a lifetime experience.

I've learned that life is a memory box. Nobody knows what's around the corner.

My advice to others would be, find something that floats your boat. Don't put things off. We are

responsible for our own happiness. It took me a long time to see that. I always thought you needed to be part of a double act but I learned that other people are not going to make you happy.

I'm standing strong and I'm happy.

“THESE DAYS, INSTEAD OF PUTTING BARRIERS IN MY WAY, I KNOCK THEM DOWN. I AM CREATING LOADS OF MEMORIES FOR MYSELF AND FOR MY CHILDREN.”



BERNIE WALSH, 55
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 2012

Bernie was diagnosed in November 2012. She underwent two lumpectomy surgeries and eight weeks of chemotherapy, followed by 12 weeks of a second chemotherapy regimen.

A severe reaction to this saw her spend over a week in ICU.

The chemotherapy was cancelled and she moved to hormone therapy and seven weeks of radiotherapy. She finished her treatment in September 2013.



Standing on the stage on the opening night of Jesus Christ Superstar, that was when I knew I had made it through breast cancer.

When I first felt the lump, I knew in my heart what it was, but when they told me that it actually was breast cancer, my first reaction was terror. My mind went into overdrive. I didn't know what to think or what to feel.

I've been involved with the Coolmine Music Society for more than 16 years. I was chairperson of the society when I got my diagnosis and I was determined to keep up my involvement. Unfortunately, a bad reaction to chemotherapy meant I had to resign half way through my treatment.

But almost a year to the day after my diagnosis, I was standing on that stage in Jesus Christ Superstar – one of my favourite musicals. There was such a sense of achievement and a real buzz.

A few weeks before that, just as my radiotherapy was ending, I did a flash mob performance in Leopardstown racecourse with 100 other people. It was my first time out in public without my hat or my wig.

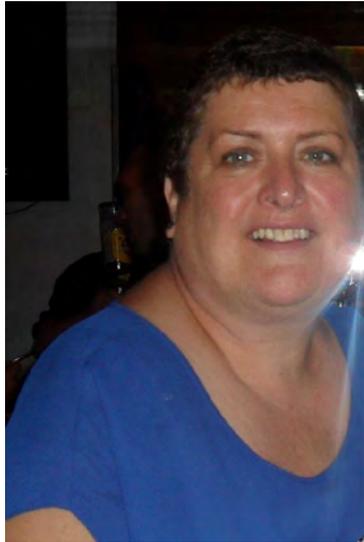
I'm not going to be afraid to do things anymore. I'm just going to do them.

My advice to anyone would be to grab life with both hands and run with it. Don't be afraid of challenges. If you don't take on new challenges, you'll never know if you can succeed.

A year that started out awful, ended up being amazing for me. Cancer changed me but it changed me for the better. I wanted to live because I have two great kids and I want to be around them for a long

time. I cherish every day now. I wake up every morning and I am genuinely thankful that I am still here.

**“IT TOOK CANCER
TO GIVE ME A KICK UP
THE BACKSIDE,
TO SAY ‘GET UP AND
LIVE YOUR LIFE’.”**



**DEIRDRE
FEATHERSTONE, 50**
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 2012

Deirdre was sent to hospital by her GP in September 2012 for a tummy problem. Before the end of that week she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She had eight months of chemotherapy, followed by a mastectomy and six weeks of radiotherapy.

Deirdre opted for reconstructive surgery and had what she hopes is her last surgery last month. Her blog is www.kickingtheshiteoutofcancer.com



I was determined that I was going to kick the shite out of cancer, so it was the perfect title for my blog. I started www.kickingtheshiteoutofcancer.com when I was diagnosed in September 2012. It has been really therapeutic for me. And it has over a quarter of a million views, which is pretty amazing.

When they told me that I had breast cancer and that I would need chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery, I thought 'OK, I'm going to be sick for the next year. It can either be crap or I can make something of it.' So I started writing the blog. I've made some amazing friends through it. We've supported each other and we've been able to support people who are starting off on the journey. Some nights we're all still gabbing away at 4am, unable to sleep for the medication.

In June 2013 we had our first 'Strip and Dip'. To raise money for two little girls with cancer, about 80 women got together, stripped naked and ran into the Irish Sea at Magheramore Beach in Wicklow. I had one boob and no hair but I wasn't the only boobless one there. There were all kinds of body shapes

there - people who had had cancer or were just starting out on that road, people who had lost someone to cancer, people who had been touched by cancer in some way. It was liberating and empowering and magical. And we raised €24,000 to boot.

It has now become an annual event. It's always an amazing feeling. It's a celebration and a remembrance, and lots of fun. To date we have raised over €70,000 for children's cancer. For me, that's a great achievement in my life and I wouldn't have been able to do it without my wonderfully cool 'Dipper' friends.

I came through cancer with a different attitude. The lesson I learned is: Get rid of all the negative people in your life and surround yourself with the positives.

Having cancer turned out to be a very special time in my life. When you're sick you're stripped back to who you really are. There's a real honesty about people, and everyone is in the same boat. It's amazing the friendships you make. Having those friendships made cancer less scary and made the journey less lonely.

**“TAKE CHANCES IN LIFE.
TAKE RISKS. DO A NIKE
ON IT - JUST DO IT.
DO IT BECAUSE YOU
MIGHT NOT GET
ANOTHER CHANCE.”**



**DEIRDRE
MORRISSEY, 40**
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 2011

Deirdre was diagnosed in December 2011 at the age of 36. At the time her daughters were aged 5 and 2. She had a mastectomy on December 23rd and was discharged from hospital on Christmas Eve. She started chemotherapy in January and went on to have six weeks of radiotherapy.



Once I started chemotherapy, I became very depressed and withdrawn. I cut myself off from everybody with the exception of my husband and children. I wouldn't even drop my kids to school because I didn't want anyone asking me how I was doing. I couldn't find the good in anything. Nothing gave me joy. I would go to bed at 8pm with the kids so that I could say another day was over and I could mark it off the calendar. People were trying to make me laugh but I had nothing to laugh about, so I just cut family and friends out of my life.

It took a good six months before I started to think that maybe I would come out the other end of this. I started to feel that this horrible nightmare would finish the day I finished radiotherapy. And it did.

That day I sent out a flood of texts to all the people who had been trying to support me through it all but who I had blocked out. I wanted to meet each of them as soon as possible. Once I started going out and meeting up

with people again my outlook started to change.

A few weeks after finishing treatment, I went to see Leonard Cohen in Kilmainham with my husband and a group of friends. I'd bought new clothes, and there we were, sitting on the grass in Kilmainham on a beautiful summer's evening. It was fantastic. I even had three glasses of wine which I hadn't been able to do in about 10 months. I woke up with my first hangover in a long, long time and it felt great.

We have a great life now. Now I feel like a survivor. I never thought I'd be able to say that. It's a long road and there are buckets of tears along the way but I can't believe my life now compared to three years ago. I never thought I'd be happy again.

I have no ambition to climb Mount Everest or run a marathon or anything like that. I'm at my happiest on a Friday night, sitting on the couch watching the Late Late Show with a glass of vino.

**“IT’S ALL ABOUT THE
KIDS. AS LONG AS I’M
HERE TO SEE THEM
GROW UP, THAT’S
ENOUGH FOR ME.”**



JACKIE CONLAN, 51
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 1989

Jackie was originally diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 24. She was diagnosed with a second tumour 11 years later. Genetic testing revealed that she carried the BRCA gene mutation which confers an increased risk of breast and ovarian cancer. Jackie has had her breasts, ovaries and womb removed.



One of my favourite quotes is from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, “get busy living or get busy dying”. I’m definitely the get busy living kind.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1989 I was 24 and my daughter was just 7 months old. I had chemotherapy followed by radiotherapy and despite the odds, I went on to have two more wonderful children. During a routine check-up in 2000, they found a second tumour in the other breast. On genetic testing it turned out that I carry the BRCA gene. Three of my six sisters have also had breast cancer. I have had my breasts and ovaries removed, as well as a full hysterectomy – the same as Angelina Jolie, so I’m in the cool gang now.

For many years, on my way to work, I would drive under the footbridge that connected the north campus of Maynooth College to the south campus. I’d watch the students crossing and be so envious. I always wanted to go to college but being the youngest of 11 children, it just wasn’t an option when I left school.

After my second diagnosis, I took some time off work and at 44 years of age, I started studying sociology and history at

Maynooth University. I’ll never forget that first day walking across the footbridge. I just stood there in the middle of the bridge, looking down at the traffic for about 10 minutes.

At graduation in 2010, my name was called out as the highest achieving student of my year. I remember accepting the award and I genuinely appreciated it and what it represented. I was offered the John Hume Scholarship to pursue a PhD and I was so thrilled and honoured to be offered this prestigious prize.

In August, I did the Camino de Santiago in Northern Spain with my two daughters and one of my best friends. We walked 25Km every day carrying a backpack so you had to consider very carefully what to bring. When I was packing to go, the question was, ‘do I bring the boobs? Do I value them enough to put them in the backpack

and lug them around for 25Km every day?’ The answer was no.

Breast cancer is something that happened to me but that’s all. It doesn’t define me. I choose to get busy living and I can’t wait for the next adventure.

**“AFTER BREAST CANCER,
PEOPLE LIVE
A DIFFERENT WAY
BUT A FREER WAY.
I GIVE MYSELF THE
FREEDOM TO LIVE.
I’M OPEN TO ANYTHING.
IF I CAN FIT IT IN MY
DIARY, I’M GAME.”**



LESLEY BERNEY, 41
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 2002

Lesley found a lump in her breast while taking a shower in August 2002. Following a lumpectomy, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was one of only three women in the country under 30 diagnosed with breast cancer that year. Two weeks after the lumpectomy, she had a partial mastectomy.

The surgery coincided with her 3rd wedding anniversary. She received six months of chemotherapy followed by radiotherapy.

Lesley is currently in the second year of a psychology degree at DCU and hopes to eventually work in the field of child psychology.



I believe everything happens for a reason and I believe cancer gave me my life back.

In 2002, when I was 28, I went to my GP because we were having difficulty getting pregnant. As I was leaving, as sort of an after-thought, I asked him to check a lump I'd found in my breast. A few weeks later I was seen at the breast clinic and I was told it was nothing to worry about. I literally cried with relief. But a few days later I got a call to say the consultant had reviewed my file and wanted me back in. I had a lumpectomy on September 5th and on September 10th, I was told that the lump was cancer.

I was a typical Celtic Tiger cub - very career-driven, lots of business travel. You get caught up in the rat race. I lost sight of what was important. Cancer made me stand still and just breathe. To say cancer completely changed my life is an

understatement. It was a lightbulb moment.

I'm a foster mum now. It's been an

incredibly rewarding journey, we've had 12 kids through this house in the last four years. I have two full-time girls at the moment and a little lady with autism who comes to stay with us every second weekend and has done for the past four years. Our home is their home and I've loved every second of it.

I always knew I wasn't going to die. Even if the universe wanted me to die, I wasn't going to. I don't do anything I don't want to. But I still had to see my consultant regularly for check-ups. For the last five years it's been once a year. Last year he signed me off. He said: "Lesley, we're breaking up. It's not you it's me."

I thank cancer for showing me what's important.

“BEING A FOSTER MUM IS MY JOB NOW AND IT’S THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD. MY JOB IS TO ADVOCATE FOR THESE KIDS AND DO WHAT’S IN THEIR BEST INTEREST. I BELIEVE THAT IF I HADN’T GOTTEN CANCER, THAT WOULDN’T HAVE HAPPENED.”



**LORRAINE
REDMOND, 47**
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 2014

Lorraine was diagnosed in May 2014 as part of a programme provided by her employers Marks & Spencer which invites all female employees over 40 to have a mammogram every two years. She underwent a lumpectomy, three months of chemotherapy and two months of radiotherapy. She finished treatment on December 15th - the day before her 47th birthday.



Cancer isn't fun. It was a horrible year. But it did change me and make me a better person I believe.

I was diagnosed through a routine mammogram. There was no lump to feel, so I was completely shell-shocked. The doctors told me the outlook was good, but all I could think about was that I had cancer and this could be it. Every time I saw my beautiful grandchildren, I wondered if I would get to see them making their communion. There were waves of fear and sadness.

I attended a Survive and Thrive workshop with the Marie Keating Foundation which gave me the kick I needed to say to myself 'You survived! Go live your life, enjoy yourself, and be grateful.'

I used to think my job was so important, and I would clean the house every day.

We waste so many years planning to do things or putting things off, saying I can't do that because I need to buy a new car. I had gotten into a rut of being a sensible grown-up. Buying a new car

might be the sensible thing to do, but it's not really much fun. We don't need to put €1,000s into a house that's going to be left

behind us. Having a nice car or a nice house isn't half as much fun as rolling down the hill in the park with your grandkids. I'm the fun nanny.

I've made some amazing friends - other women who have been through the same thing. This year at the Relay for Life in Ballyfermot, four of us got a tattoo on our wrists that says 'Believe', with the pink breast cancer ribbon running through it.

I love my job, and I do the best I can at it, but now when I clock out I clock out. I live every single day. I try to do something fun and enjoyable instead of sitting around watching TV and getting ready for work. My partner and I might drive to Howth, buy a bag of chips and just sit watching the sea. I don't say

I'm too tired to go to the park or it's too cold to walk on the beach. Life is a celebration.

**“CANCER HAS TAUGHT
ME THAT LIFE IS FOR
LIVING. IT WOKE ME UP
TO THE FACT THAT LIFE
IS NOT A REHEARSAL.
THIS IS THE REAL THING.
THESE DAYS I LIVE
IN THE NOW.”**



NICOLA CAHILL, 35
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 2013

Nicola was diagnosed last year, a week after her 34th birthday. Playing pitch and putt one morning, she felt pain in her right breast. Over the next three weeks the pain got progressively worse. Her GP referred her to St James's Hospital for assessment and she was given her diagnosis a week later. Because her cancer was oestrogen-positive, her doctors used medication to induce early menopause. She received chemotherapy for four months, radiotherapy for more than six weeks and has now had a double mastectomy.



I lost a lot to cancer, but I gained a lot too. Because the doctors had to induce menopause, I know I'll never physically carry a child of my own. The risk of my breast cancer recurring would be too much. I come from a big family and I always hoped that someday I would meet somebody and have kids of my own. That was difficult to accept.

I used to be very active and play a lot of sport, and I'll never be able to go back to being as active as I was. For the reconstruction surgery they had to take a large graft from my back and that has limited me a lot. That has been hard for me.

Everyone told me it was very unusual to be diagnosed with cancer at 34 so that first day walking into the chemo ward, I wasn't expecting to see any other women my age. But I was wrong. I saw that it's not rare to get breast

cancer in your 20s or 30s.

People said not to make friends in the chemo ward and I can understand that, but the best thing to come out of this horrific situation are the friends I've made.

There's a group of seven of us who were diagnosed with cancer in our 20s or 30s - some are a little older than me, some are a little younger - and we are now friends for life. We're there for each other in the tough times and we go out and have fun together too. I don't think I would have managed all this so well without them.

Cancer opened my eyes to the world and to people. These days I focus on the now and the people who have been with me on this journey. Nobody knows what's around the corner.

I stay positive, but a lot of that is down to the people around me.

“THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF LOSS, BUT ON THE OTHER SIDE, I HAVE MADE FRIENDSHIPS THAT WILL LAST A LIFETIME.”



ROISIN DUNNE, 49
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 2012

Roisin was 46 when she was diagnosed. She had fallen and hurt her ribs, and it was then that she noticed a large lump in her left breast. On mammogram she was found to have an 8cm tumour in her left breast and a smaller tumour in the other breast. She underwent eight rounds of chemotherapy, followed by a bilateral mastectomy.



When they told me I had breast cancer all I could think about was my daughter. As a single mother with a four-year-old girl, I couldn't bear the thought of her going through her life alone. I didn't want Darcy to grow up to be a sad person with a sad story, but I couldn't help thinking about all the big occasions in her life that I would miss.

Even though her communion was three years away, I went out one day and bought her a communion dress. I put it in the back of the wardrobe and told nobody about it except my mother. If I didn't make it to that day, I wanted her to know that she was wearing a dress that her mum picked out for her.

To protect her from what was going on we never talked about cancer around her. We created a code name for cancer. We called it Kevin. My mum was say 'How is Kevin today?' and I'd say 'He's a bit tired today' or 'He's not doing too bad'.

I felt so guilty for bringing Darcy into this

world and then placing all this sadness on her.

But on 17th of May this year, Darcy made her communion in a brand new communion dress that we picked out together. I was standing there right beside her, cancer free.

These days I live for the day. I'm in. I don't worry about saving for that rainy day anymore. Life is too short.

I value the people in my life so much more. Family, friends, neighbours - they were all so good to me. My neighbours arranged a rota between them so that I had a hot, healthy, home-cooked meal served to me every evening in bed. Things like that meant the world to me.

And I don't worry about what people think of me anymore. I'm not afraid to be silly.

People must have thought I was crazy but once you've had to walk around with no hair and no eyebrows and bloated from steroids,

looking silly doesn't really matter. I was giving my child happy memories and that's more important than fitting in.

**“ONE WET DAY DARCY
AND I MADE IT FROM THE
TOP OF GRAFTON ST TO
THE BOTTOM DANCING
AND JUMPING IN
PUDDLES AND SINGING
CHRISTMAS CAROLS AT
THE TOP OF OUR LUNGS.”**



YVONNE JOYE, 47
BREAST CANCER
SURVIVOR SINCE 2009

Yvonne was diagnosed in November 2009. Having felt an abnormality in her breast and hearing all the messages about breast checks, she went to her GP who referred her to a specialist.

Five days later, she was given her diagnosis.

She had a double lumpectomy, followed by four sessions of chemotherapy and 25 sessions of radiotherapy. She is now the author of two books – Ten Fingers and Ten Toes, and An Inconvenient Year, which details her breast cancer journey.



That day in December 2009 when I got the call to say that I was cancer-free, I was alone in my kitchen. Hearing those words, left me sliding to the floor in relief. Tears rolled down my face and repeating “thank you” over and over was all I could say. Long after the call ended, I remained on the floor, still thanking but instead of crying I was now smiling.

That call changed everything. Whatever treatment prescribed, I would do; chemotherapy, radiotherapy medication. How could I complain about hair loss, when I had been worried about my life?

I went through chemo and I started radiotherapy at the end of April 2010. Radiotherapy didn't impact on me too much. This was a time of hope; it was spring and I was coming out the other side.

Naturally, cancer coming back frightens me. On my second chemo session I met a woman who had been cancer-free for three years

and then she got it again. That undid me. A number of mothers with kids at my son's school got cancer and not all of those lovely girls survived. That scares me.

But I can't let it overtake me. I have been gifted with a second chance at life and it's up to me to live it; I owe it to myself and I owe to those who love me. So I take my medication, I go for my check-ups and I walk every-day.

I get to share more of life with my husband and my children. I get to be there for them, through the big stuff and the small stuff; their first Wes, leaving cert, university, picnics on the beach. Surviving cancer means I get to have all that.

I now chase what makes me happy, capture it and make it part of my life. And I urge the same for my children; to seek, find and work at what makes them happy and contented.

It's all I want for them and good health too, please God.

**“THE BIGGEST CHANGE
CANCER HAS BROUGHT
TO MY LIFE IS THAT I NO
LONGER WASTE TIME. I
CHERISH TIME, USE TIME
AND SPEND TIME ONLY
WITH THOSE WHO DO
NOT WASTE MINE.”**



This campaign could not have happened without the contributions of several people.

Thanks to Gerry Andrews for taking the beautiful portrait photographs, which help to portray the return to normality after a hugely emotional and physically difficult experience.

Thanks to Dawn O'Shea for conducting the interviews so sensitively, and helping these brave women to articulate their very moving stories of survival.

Sharing your cancer story is a deeply personal and sometimes difficult thing to do. We would like to express deep and sincere gratitude to all ten women who so graciously shared their stories and their very personal 'survivorship milestone' photographs.

Dealing with a cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming. If you or a member of your family has been diagnosed with breast cancer, there is help and support available. Contact the Marie Keating Foundation on 01 6283726 or visit www.mariekeating.ie for more information.

This campaign was produced by Roche in partnership with the Marie Keating Foundation.



