

# THE MORNING CALL

## Surviving cancer is part of women's history, too

### Document Text

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On a Sunday morning in the rolling hills of southern Lehigh County, signs of early spring were everywhere; the frozen ground was softening, shades of brown were yielding to tinges of green, carefully placed pots of daffodils and narcissus stood like bright splashes of hope on a barren landscape.

Hope was in the air that day as a group of "over 40" women gathered to celebrate the survival of one of their own. Standing in the March chill, they posed for a group photograph, each holding a pink balloon. The guest of honor said "Cheese!" and the moment was digitally frozen in time as the balloons drifted toward Heaven. Better them today than the soul of a friend.

The cure being worse than the disease is an often-heard phrase about the treatment for breast cancer. Chemotherapy frequently results in waves of debilitating nausea, sapping every ounce of energy. The loss of a woman's hair may not be physically painful, but it is a hard blow to the spirit. The will to keep fighting is an internal fire that burns brightest when stoked from the outside: Study after study have shown that women who feel loved and supported have better treatment outcomes.

The friendship of other women, the bond that exists without a word being spoken, is often what sustains us through life's most difficult moments. It is not that men do not love or comfort us, but they do not speak the secret language of the sisterhood.

March is Women's History Month, a time to celebrate all that we have been and all that we will be. It is a history filled with many heroines, from the Suffragettes who were imprisoned by their own government a hundred years ago, to the groundbreaking 21st century presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton.

The history of women is full of such well-known accounts of political courage, it is also laced with lesser-known stories about courage of the spirit; famous and not-so-famous breast cancer battles fought and won, and some that were lost.

It is a history I share. Seared on my memory are the sobs of my mother the first time she looked in the mirror after her mastectomy. I was 4, she was 42. Back then, a diagnosis of a malignant lump almost always ended in what today would be considered mutilation: A large, raised scar crossed the width of a sunken chest. Reconstruction was rare and remedy came in the form of a misshapen pad whose every slip and slide was a reminder of what had been lost.

More brutal than such surgery was the lack of support some women endured from partners who could not deal with the new reality. On the Web site Breast Cancer Advisor, ([bcadvisor.com](http://bcadvisor.com)), one item of spousal advice still cautions, "A woman can get over cancer, but she'll never get over the deep and lasting emotional injury. . . if you abandon her now."

Since my mother's ordeal, there has been much progress in both medicine and mores, including the openness with which breast cancer can be discussed and the understanding of the importance of regular mammography.

The Lehigh County woman whose last chemotherapy treatment was being celebrated on that spring morning, has, like so many others, a very positive prognosis. Cherished by friends and loved by family, her life is expected to return to normal. Science and medicine continue to present options that lessen the trauma both physically and mentally, while enhancing the odds of survival. Advanced surgical techniques are much less invasive, and when a mastectomy is necessary, reconstruction is now routine.

I've always believed that life is a series of lessons. When you wake up each morning, you never know which one you're going to learn that day. By the time you've reached the age of the women gathered on that hill, odds are you have a master's degree in patience, humility, self-reliance ^... and courage: These are qualities that women, both famous and ordinary, have brought to the world, and to the sisterhood, throughout history.

One of America's most inspiring women, Eleanor Roosevelt, said, "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.' ... You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

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