A Young Woman Looks Back: Losing Her Mother to Breast Cancer

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In August 1997, the wonderful life my mother had worked so hard to make for us came to an abrupt halt. I distinctly remember the hot summer day when we were watching television and the telephone rang. It was the gynecologist my mom had worked with for 20 years asking her to come into the office to discuss the results of her mammogram. I can still recall the frightened look on my mother’s face and the suffocating feelings. I accompanied my mother and grandmother to see the physician and sat in the waiting room unable to focus on anything but the peach-colored walls, anxiously waiting for my mother, grandmother, and the doctor to come out of his office. I do not remember what I was thinking at only 11 years of age, but I know that what I was told shortly after was something I could never have imagined: My mom had breast cancer. I remember hearing “cancer” and feeling as though every bit of life within me was drained out.

I always felt as though the bond my mother and I shared was deeper than the average mother and daughter. My father and my mother separated before I was born. My mom welcomed me, her only child, into the world without anyone else by her side. As a single mom, she worked very hard to provide what she felt was needed, always making time for us to spend together. She was always there for me. I could have never imagined my life without her. We lived with my grandmother, who looked after me while my mom went to work, and the three of us were inseparable.

I remember, even as a young child, thinking about how lucky I was to have two strong and exemplary women in my life. I always looked up to my mother and admired the strength she possessed. She was a young adolescent when her parents immigrated to the United States from Costa Rica and she had to deal with coming to a new country, learning a new language, and adjusting to a new culture. She met this challenge and made all other obstacles she faced seem effortless.

Although the improvement in breast cancer survival statistics is a move in the right direction, it creates mixed emotions for me. Why was my mother one of the ones who had to die? Was she given the appropriate treatment? Was her breast cancer detected too late to be cured? Then I wonder about myself. Will I have breast cancer one day and, if I do, will I have the good fortune to be treated with the latest developments? Will I be a survivor or will I, too, die from this dreadful disease?

Everything seemed to move quickly after my mother received the diagnosis. She underwent surgery and had a radical mastectomy. I remember feeling so helpless; I couldn’t do anything to make her breast cancer go away, to help her incision heal faster, or relieve the horrific nausea and vomiting and fatigue after chemotherapy. I could only sit and watch as chemotherapy infused into the Port-a-Cath® on the left side of her chest, knowing that the side effects got worse with each cycle of chemotherapy. I never heard a word of complaint from my mother. I was amazed by her strength and courage. I am not sure if she internalized her fears and pain, but she appeared positive and confident that she would win the struggle.

Once my mother’s treatments were over, life seemed to return to normal. The prosthesis and special bras had not got- ten over, life seemed to return to normal. The prosthesis and special bras had not got-

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The impact of a Mother’s Breast Cancer on Children

As many as 43,000–86,000 children younger than age 18 are potentially af-

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