

SILVER LINING

Cancer is not something you would ever wish for, but sometimes positive things come from the challenges life throws us. Lindy Alexander speaks to four women who have lived through cancer and are determined to use their experience to help others.

WORDS BY LINDY ALEXANDER

RACHAEL LONERGAN GETTING HELP APPILY

Accepting the help of others can be challenging, even when we need it most. Thankfully, there's an app for that.

"What can I do?" It's the question almost every unwell person gets asked. When Rachael Lonergan was undergoing treatment for breast cancer in 2008 she would routinely tell people she didn't want or need anything. "I was single and lived alone and I didn't ask for help," the 48-year-old says. "When people did offer, I would say I was fine."

Lonergan never told her family or friends how she really felt, which was that she was often craving fresh juice or that she wanted someone to change her sheets, because she didn't want to impose on them. Lonergan's sister had been receiving treatment for sarcoma for several years when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and she was struck by the different support systems around them both.

"My sister was a mum and had two kids in school," she says. "I think mums are very good at organising and doing what needs to be done. My sister had people dropping around food, managing the kids and generally helping." Lonergan, on the other hand, didn't have any of that support. "I had an independent lifestyle, and didn't have those structures around me," she says. "My friendships were based on work and going out for cocktails."

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LENDING A HAND

Despite this, Lonergan's friends did want to help her. Knowing that people wanted to help but weren't sure how, and acknowledging that she wasn't comfortable asking for assistance, Lonergan came up with a practical solution – an

app called CanDo where people can set up a list of tasks that they need help with. "Asking for help and receiving it is a difficult thing but the app starts the conversation," she says.

The free app, which was developed with the support of the Garvan Research Foundation, allows people to ask specific friends or family members for help, or they can enter a general task that needs to be done. People can propose everything from cooking a meal or mowing the lawn to providing transport to an appointment or hanging out laundry. Technology is often accused of distancing people from each other but in this case, it's an opportunity to bring people together. "There's a lady who uses the app to schedule a 20-minute walk every day with a friend," says Lonergan. "When you're sick you tend to drop out of people's social circles so it's a way for her to stay connected."

CANDO ATTITUDE

Ten years on from her initial cancer diagnosis, Lonergan has friends who still tell her they wish she had let them help her more. "I realised it's not just about me," she says. "It's about them and how they wanted to contribute to our friendship. People genuinely want to help and if you direct them about what you want, they are happy to provide that. The app works on people accepting the premise that help is a good thing."

Download the CanDo app on the Apple Store or Google Play. cando.com.au



JULIE McGLASHAN GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH CANCER

When she couldn't find the perfect pyjamas – a pair that met all manner of new needs – Julie McGlashan designed her own.

Sitting in her surgeon's office just days after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2011, Julie McGlashan was in shock. Then her surgeon said a surprising thing. "He told me that some women come out the other side of the treatment and it changes their life in a good way," says the 52 year old. "I sat there and thought, 'yeah right.'"

Fifteen days after being diagnosed, McGlashan was scheduled to have a mastectomy of her left breast. She was given a list of requirements for her hospital stay. One item was pyjamas with a button-down front. "I found it so difficult to find pyjamas that ticked all the boxes – comfortable, elegant, supportive and with buttons," she says. "At the time I lived six hours from Sydney and on one of my trips to the hospital I started thinking about making pyjamas that would be soft on a woman's skin after surgery, but also stylish."

A PERKY IDEA

The idea of Perky PJs started to grow in McGlashan's mind, but it wasn't until 2015 that she seriously pursued it. The insight McGlashan had into the experiences of cancer patients coupled with her previous experience in the fashion industry meant she was able to team up with a designer friend to create snug, breathable and sophisticated pyjamas made from natural materials. "Bamboo is such a beautiful, soft fabric and I knew that was important," she says. "When I went through chemotherapy my tummy would swell and

I didn't want any pressure on my belly, so there's no elastic in our waistbands. And after having a mastectomy you often can't move your arm, so putting pants on can be difficult. That's why you can just pull the pyjamas on and off."

Being diagnosed with cancer and undergoing treatment inevitably disrupts people's lives and McGlashan says her pyjamas are much more than an item of clothing. "You're not the only one who goes through cancer," she says. "Your whole family

experiences it and so you want to keep normality and stability in your life and theirs. Not looking lopsided in my pyjamas was important for me, my husband and children. The supported PJs really help women's self-esteem so they feel like a regular woman again."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

A private person, McGlashan says putting her story "out there to the world" has been difficult. "But I know I'm helping other women by sharing my story and creating the pyjamas," she

says. "It's great to get emails from women and know you've made a difference in their life through something as simple as a pair of pyjamas. That makes the whole thing worthwhile."

Thinking back to the days just after her diagnosis, McGlashan now has a different take on her surgeon's comment. "He was right," she says simply. "This has had a very positive impact on my life. It seemed like it would never end, but there is light at the end of the tunnel."

Perky PJs are available online at perkypjs.com.au ►



"It's great to get emails from women and know you've made a difference in their life ..."

“When you’re diagnosed with cancer, you’re confronted with a demon ...”

RACHELLE PANITZ BEING BOLD AND BRAVE

The female form covered head to toe in body paint makes for a striking vision. In this case, it’s also in aid of a worthy cause.

In mid-autumn of 2016, a warrior stood on the grounds of Parliament House in Canberra. With painted skin, elfin ears, a bejewelled headdress and powerful staff, she looked as if she was ready to fight a mythical battle. But for Rachelle Panitz, the steely woman underneath the arresting swirls of blue, purple and grey body paint, the battle she had just fought was far from a fairytale.

Panitz was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2014 when she was just 32. She had a six-week-old son and a three-year-old daughter. “I was in a whirlwind of doctors’ appointments, meeting surgeons and oncologists,” she says. “I made a treatment

plan, went through six months of chemotherapy, seven weeks of radiation, 12 months of immunotherapy and three-and-a-half years of injectable hormone therapy. My life had been turned upside down.”

AGE IS NO BARRIER

Around five per cent of all breast cancers diagnosed in Australia will be in women aged 20-39 years, according to the Breast Cancer Foundation. “Breast cancer is particularly harrowing for young women because it’s often at a difficult time in your life – you may have small children, a big mortgage and be at the beginning of your career,” says Panitz.

While she was recovering, Panitz met internationally renowned body paint artist Wendy Fantasia at a conference. “Wendy offered to paint me and I said I’d think about it,” Panitz says. “Having my body painted is not something I would have ever pictured myself doing.” But Fantasia’s offer stayed with her and she wondered if there was a possibility of using body art to raise awareness and vital funds for young women diagnosed with breast cancer.

Panitz later contacted Fantasia and told her she

had an idea for a fundraising calendar. “I asked Wendy if she’d be interested in painting young women who had breast cancer,” she says. “I thought it would be really empowering for each of the women as they’ve lost so much – body parts, hair and even relationships.”

MEET MISS FEBRUARY

Panitz established So Brave, a breast cancer charity for young women, and launched the first calendar in August 2016. “We raised \$70,000 for the National Breast Cancer Foundation and the Centre for Personalised NanoMedicine,” she says. “The first calendar featured stories and breathtaking images of young women who were diagnosed with breast cancer before they turned 40. I was Miss February.”

So Brave’s mission is to raise awareness about breast cancer in young women. “It’s not just an old woman’s disease,” Panitz says. “Young women need to be doing regular, monthly self-examinations and not be intimidated by speaking to a doctor if they find something unusual.”

Panitz has seen many women transformed through Fantasia’s striking body art. “When you’re diagnosed with cancer, you’re confronted with a demon and you don’t know what the outcome is going to be,” she says. “Women tell us that being painted was the best day of their life and that they feel liberated. It’s life-changing for them to see their bodies in a new light.”

The So Brave calendar is available online at sobrave.com.au.



SHARON STONE

CHANGING THE COLOUR OF CANCER

A few coloured pencils helped Sharon Stone track her journey towards health, and now she's helping others do the same.

It was the results from a routine mammogram that changed Sharon Stone's life. "I had no symptoms and no lumps," she says. "I felt like I was at the top of my game so it was a huge shock to be diagnosed with early stage breast cancer in February 2017."

While the cancer was small, it was aggressive, so Stone underwent lumpectomy surgery. "I only had three or four days off work and I felt well," she says. "But then I had to have four weeks of radiation. I really didn't want to have something like that in my body when I didn't feel like I was sick."

COLOURFUL PROGRESS

Despite her reservations, Stone underwent radiation therapy but knew she would need something to help get her through it. "I'm an executive coach who focuses on positive psychology," she says. "I decided to mark each day off on a calendar so I could see my progress and have a sense of completion when I got to the end."

Stone drew up a template and put the treatment dates in each of the 20 squares. Rather than simply cross off each square, Stone decided to use coloured pencils to fill in each day based on how she felt. In doing so, the words 'colour me well' popped into Stone's head and she wrote the mantra at the top of the page. "By the fourth day of treatment a friend saw what I was doing and suggested I share

it," she says. "In my mind it was a kind of childlike activity that was just for me, but my friends kept encouraging me so I posted it to Instagram."

From there, her idea took on a life of its own. "I soon realised that this was a way for my family and friends to keep updated on my progress without having to keep asking me how I was going," she says. "Depending on how I coloured a square, they knew if I was having a good or bad day and if I needed more support." Many of Stone's friends and family posted messages in response to her colouring and told her they were cheering her on from afar.

SHARING THE EXPERIENCE

On the last day of treatment, Stone sat colouring in the final square and realised how helpful the template had been and thought about how it may assist others through their own cancer experience. She registered Colour Me Well as a business name and found a designer to translate her relatively simple idea into a wellness calendar kit so that other cancer patients could creatively journal their treatment experience. The response so far has been positive. "I've had amazing feedback," Stone says. "This is such a

powerful tool that encourages mindfulness, self-expression and communication."

Stone has no doubts that the process of colouring in the template helped her navigate a scary, painful and overwhelming time. "At the end of the day, you can't control much of what happens in your life," she says, "but you do have control over how you travel through it."

To buy a Colour Me Well kit, visit colourmewell.com.au.

VISIT Go to mindfood.com/wishyouwell to learn about a fun series of 'Get Well' cards that replaces tired clichés with more honest messages.

