

**SPECIAL REPORT:**

women's health

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY VINCE WALTER

No one can better express an experience than those who have lived it. Here, three breast cancer survivors share their journeys of survival and self-discovery.

# Gayle Roswarski



She had just finished nursing her fourth child when she discovered what she thought was a clogged milk duct. After a couple rounds of antibiotics, the lump remained so Gayle Roswarski visited a radiologist. Within hours, a biopsy and MRI were performed.

Two days later, in July 2006, Roswarski was diagnosed with cancer. A week later she was told she had Stage IV breast cancer.

Stunned, Roswarski listened as the physician told her and her husband, Steve, that they would try to maintain her quality of life for as long as they could.

“Maintain my quality of life? That was unacceptable to me,” says Roswarski defiantly. “I had four children from ages 8 years to 10 months. I did not accept that I was going to leave them.”

Roswarski went home, got online and on the phone. She began calling and e-mailing family and friends, asking for their prayers and guidance.

“I wanted people to know,” she says. “I’m 35 and I don’t look like a breast cancer patient. There was no family history or indication that I could get cancer. I began to do research to find out everything I could.”

Through networking and faith, Roswarski arrived at Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Fla., just six days later. Every test was done again, with the couple praying the initial diagnosis was a mistake.

The diagnosis remained the same. However, the prognosis was different.

“My doctor was confident that I could get in remission,” says Roswarski. “He allowed me to have hope.”

To get her cancer under control, an aggressive barrage of chemotherapy treatments were planned. Roswarski plunged in.

For the next 10 months, she traveled every Monday to the IU Medical Center in Indianapolis to receive the infusion of medications devised to battle her cancer.

And as she rallied her strength to fight, her family, friends and neighbors rallied to

make life as easy as they could for her and her family. “They created a huge support system bringing meals, watching our kids, driving me to chemo,” says Roswarski. “The outpouring of support was amazing.”

She remembers her husband of 10 years working all day, coming home to do baths and laundry every night. “It was hard on him, too,” she says. “But you can’t stop living. You can’t stop being a wife and a mom.”

During her treatments, Roswarski met a Mary Kay representative who wanted to share how to mask the toll chemotherapy would have on her skin. She also had something else to share: she was a cancer survivor who traveled a different route when chemotherapy and surgery didn’t produce results.

“She was nine years out,” recalls Roswarski. “She shared what she did. She took a break from her meds and began holistic treatment. I don’t think I’d be here today if I hadn’t gone holistic.”

Roswarski was already convinced nutrition would play a role in her recovery. After being diagnosed, she felt the need to do something immediately and turned to an all raw food diet.

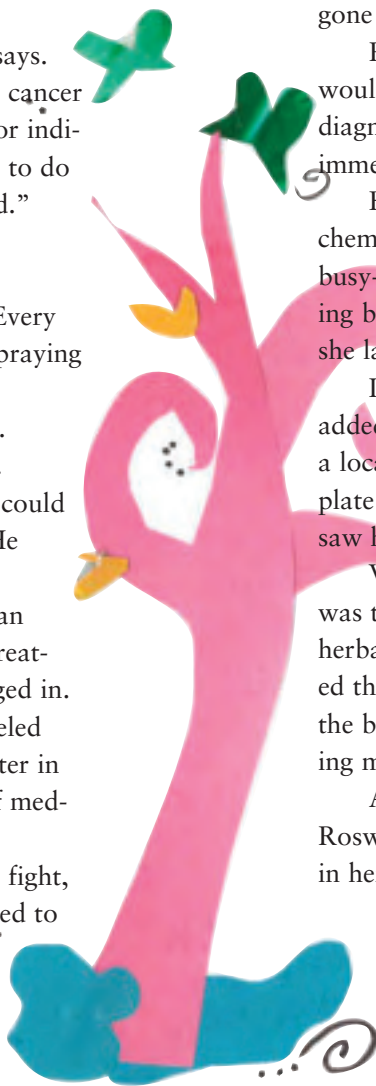
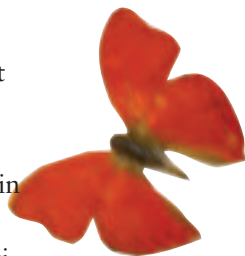
For almost two weeks prior to her first chemo treatment, she drastically changed her busy-mother-of-four eating habits and ate nothing but raw food. “And I used to hate veggies,” she laughs.

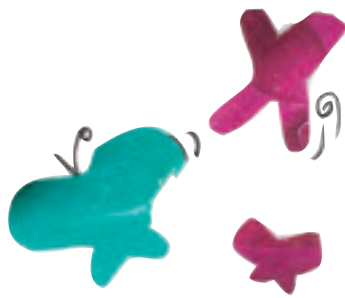
In addition to the medical component, she added supplements and herbs with the advice of a local nutritionist. She juiced and filled her plate with 75 percent vegetables and fruits. “I saw huge results,” says Roswarski.

While in the midst of chemotherapy, she was taking more than 60 pills a day. By adding herbal supplements and drops that complemented the medical treatment, she felt she was doing the best thing for her body. “I knew I was keeping my healthy cells healthy.”

After nearly a year of grueling treatments, Roswarski’s cancer was in remission. The tumor in her breast originally measured 5 centimeters.

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Following treatment, it had shrunk by 75 to 80 percent.

“I still had cancer, but it was stable,” she explains. “I want to stay in progression-free remission. It can never go away, but I can keep it stable.”

After a summer free of chemo, Roswarski learned in the fall that the tumor was growing. Although removing the tumor wouldn’t necessarily save her life, it would stop it from generating new cancer cells. Last September, Roswarski opted for a mastectomy and reconstruction. “I got new boobs. That was a perk!” she laughs.

In March, she underwent 16 rounds of radiation for a spot on her hip. And this summer, she again underwent radiation for a new spot on her neck. “I need to be proactive to keep it in remission,” she adds.

Roswarski has four precious reasons to keep her cancer at bay. Explaining to her children what was happening wasn’t easy. For the youngest daughters, ages 10 months to 6 years, Roswarski simply told the girls she was sick. But for her oldest son, who was 8 at the time of diagnosis, he knew what it meant for someone to have cancer.

“My 8 year old, he internalized it,” recalls Roswarski brushing away tears. “But we pointed out all the people we know who are living with cancer. We gave them the knowledge of what was happening as they needed it.”

She explained that her cancer is similar to someone with diabetes or a heart condition. “Sometimes you have to take medicine to keep it in check,” she adds.

And when they ask when she’ll be done with treatments and medicines, she answers honestly. “I’m not going to be done,” says Roswarski. “This is what keeps me alive.”

The young mom admits it wasn’t easy. “I was bald. I was tired. There were days I lost my patience. There were many days I was down and worried. I’ve had those fears,” she says.

“But no matter how I feel, I can’t let them see it. They need to see I’m still Mom. After my second

chemo treatment, I was out in the front yard throwing the baseball around with my son. I wanted and needed to do that.”

Sharing her cancer experience has been important to Roswarski. And her faith has steadied her, as well.

“I always felt God will heal me,” says Roswarski. “I always felt a peace that I’m not going to die from the cancer. I may die with it, but not from it. That’s a big difference.

“I want to be here 20 years out,” she continues. “I want to see my kids graduate, get married and have kids. Eight percent of Stage IV cancer patients survive 20 years out. Well, thank you, but I’m going to be in that 8 percent.”

Although Roswarski stops at calling her cancer a blessing, she does feel she’s blessed.

“My outlook has changed,” she says. “I have a new perspective and a new appreciation for every single day I’m given. A lot of people never get that.”

And in the two years since her diagnosis, she feels she has a stronger marriage, a stronger family and a deeper understanding of her faith.

“I’m preparing to live. I’m not preparing to die. I’m really healthy if not for the cancer!” she laughs.

She’s also learned that you need to be your own advocate in your healthcare, and that second opinions are vital. “Physicians are wonderful, but they do not determine your odds,” says Roswarski. “Only God determines who lives and dies.”

She also learned she needed to take better care of herself. “It’s so important to be aware of your body. As women, we focus so much on others. I needed to take better care of myself. Had I, would I have prevented the cancer? I don’t know. Would I have caught it earlier? I don’t know.”

She does know that this is her family’s new normal. “This is my life now. Cancer is in my backseat. It’s never in the driver’s seat. I focus on what’s ahead and make the most of it. This is *my* life. And I’ll take it.”

# Aadron Rausch

It started out like any other annual mammogram. Nothing had been felt during the breast exam, so Aadron Rausch went to her scheduled appointment in January as she had every year.

However, when she was told she needed a diagnostic mammogram because there was a concern, she began asking questions. “I asked them to show me on the image, and what did that mean? They didn’t know yet,” remembers Rausch.

She went for an MRI where she found herself lying face down with her breasts dropping down into

holes in the table. After she dressed, she was taken to a consultation room where she was told a needle biopsy was needed.

“Then I began to ask *a lot* of questions,” says Rausch. “I asked if this was cancer and was told the doctor would talk to me.”

As Rausch was prepared for the needle biopsy, she asked the physician if what was on the screen was cancer. “I remember the response as being so matter-of-fact,” says Rausch. “Almost like, ‘Of course, haven’t they told you?’”

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From that point on, the 48-year-old Rausch took full control of her medical care. She watched what was being done during the biopsy and asked questions. And then she waited.

A nurse practitioner from her physician's office called that same day and asked if Rausch wanted to come in to talk. Rausch said no. She asked, "Are we talking cancer?" The nurse practitioner replied, "Yes."

Rausch scheduled an appointment with a surgeon, returned to work as the director of strategic engagement of occupational health services at Clarian Arnett and conducted the first of a two-part workshop the next day. She told no one.

Rausch had been diagnosed with Stage I invasive ductal cancer. There was no family history to indicate this could happen. The good news was that it was small and had been caught early. By the time she met with her surgeon, she had gathered information and read a book on treatment options cover to cover.

Her surgeon took time with her and explained the options. Rausch decided on a mastectomy with no reconstruction. She didn't want to endure more surgery.

The mastectomy was scheduled, but Rausch refused to dwell on it. "I didn't tell anyone, except my daughter," says Rausch. "I didn't want to think about it."

The week before surgery, the thought of losing a breast became a reality. She met with a local store that helped with prosthesis and post-surgical garments.

During the surgery, it was discovered some cells had spread to the sentinel node, so it was removed as well as the next node. Rausch remembers waking up and touching the bandage.

"There was so much bandage there, I thought, 'Well, it's fine! It's me!'" But as she prepared to go home, and the bandages came off, she became extremely emotional.

"I kept thinking, 'What's going to protect me?' I was shaking and crying. My daughter kept telling me it's OK. But I wouldn't look down."

For the first time, Rausch felt completely naked and vulnerable. "I knew something horrible had just happened," she says. "For the first time, I realized and said out loud, 'I have

no breast.' From that point on, I checked out mentally." Her daughter took the instructions on how to care for the drainage tube, gathered her mom and took her home to begin recovery.

It wasn't until the end of the second day that Rausch tried to change her bandage herself. She looked at herself for the first time in the mirror – and broke down. "I just hadn't envisioned it," she says.

Every day got a little better. But then she began to experience a tremendous amount of pain. Rausch even went to the emergency room where she was assured everything was fine. By the time she saw her surgeon three days later, she had a terrible infection that required further treatment for 10 days.

The next step was to decide whether or not to pursue further treatment. Since some cells had spread to other nodes, Rausch opted for chemotherapy. "Spread is spread," she recalls saying.

So once every three weeks, for four rounds, Rausch went to chemotherapy. What she thought would be one of the most traumatic parts of cancer turned out to be one of the most positive. "They explained everything to me," says Rausch. "I had a lot of nervousness but they were very patient."

Within 14 days of her first treatment, she began to lose her hair. She tried on a wig but felt it just wasn't her. Instead she held a hair-shaving party with her daughter and son-in-law. "I took the first shave OK," says Rausch. "But the second shave, I was just devastated." Rausch felt as if she was losing yet another part of herself.

As the chemo continued, Rausch battled nausea, exhaustion, hot flashes and digestive problems. But she kept working and she kept going. In fact, just a week following her mastectomy, she led the second session of the two-part workshop. People in attendance did not know what she had undergone.

"I needed to keep pushing through," she says.

It was in February when the rest of her hair began to fall out. Rausch began wearing scarves, matching them to different outfits. She wore them to keep warm and to hide the reminder that she was fighting cancer.

“But then I began to feel the hair thing was OK,” smiles Rausch. “I was OK with a bald head.” By the time she neared her last chemo treatment in May, she was ready to move on to survivor. She stopped wearing her scarves.

“People came up to me and said I was beautiful and I thought, ‘I am who I am,’ so I went bald.”

Following the chemo, Rausch discovered cysts on her ovaries and opted to have them removed. After that, she discovered a change in how she thought about her cancer.

“I started to feel I was past the worst of it,” says Rausch. “I began to realize the lack of a breast doesn’t define me. I was there because I was a survivor.”

Once an avid jogger, Rausch put her jogging shoes back on once her energy level returned. She began living a healthier lifestyle and eating better foods. She used to dye her hair but opted to stay with the color that has grown in.

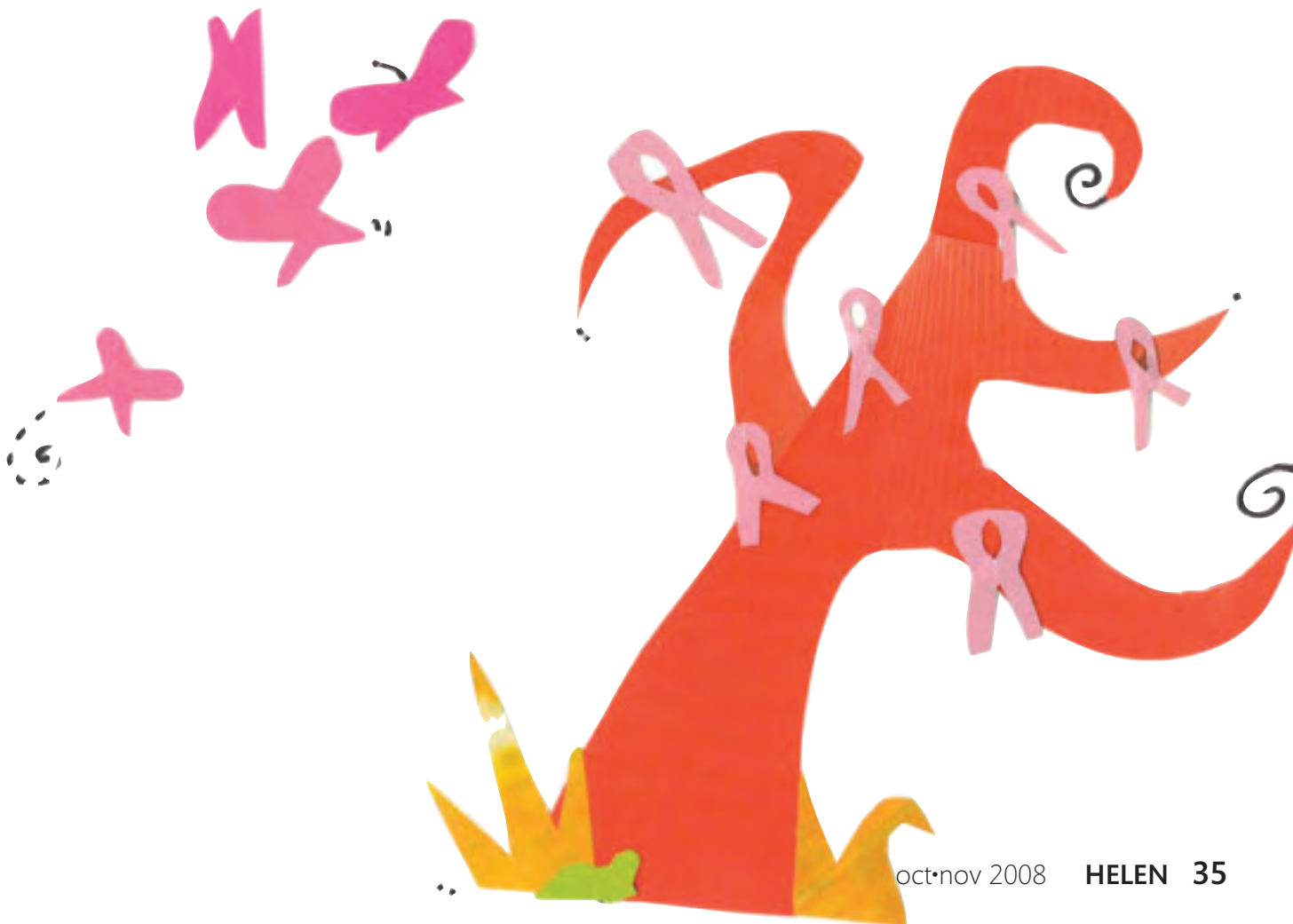
“I began to recognize that people didn’t look at me as a cancer survivor,” says Rausch. “I’m still who I always was. What a definite awakening!”

As she realized it wasn’t about whether she had a breast or what color her hair was, Rausch also realized that being comfortable in your own skin and showing that comfort is important.

“We all show the side of ourselves that we want people to see,” says Rausch. “When we strip all that away and show who we really are, it’s liberating.”

Today as she continues to stay healthy, she has made it her mission to share with others the need for them to become a partner in their own healthcare. “Women need to take care of themselves,” says Rausch. “Start with understanding your health, educating yourself and collaborating with your healthcare providers. Celebrate that you are doing everything you can to live a good, long life.”

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# Ruth Ann Brown



Ruth Ann Brown has an infectious laugh and a great sense of humor. Her humor proved invaluable 15 years ago when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

“It was quite a shock,” remembers Brown. “I felt like my life was flashing before my eyes.” A employee health nurse at Clarian Arnett, she was diagnosed at the same time two other staff members were diagnosed with cancer. “We leaned on each other,” she says.

She was 45 years old when she was diagnosed with cancer in her right breast. The tumor was large, leaving her with a choice between a lumpectomy or a mastectomy. “Back then, we didn’t have as many options,” says Brown. “And I just wanted someone to tell me what I should do. Finally, after my oncologist reviewed my charts, he said, ‘If it were my wife or mother, I’d recommend a mastectomy.’ That’s all I wanted to know.”

She underwent a mastectomy followed by chemotherapy for six months. She and her fellow cancer patients experienced the effects of chemotherapy together, including a change in their taste buds that had them ready to take Burger King to task over their sour-tasting sodas.

“We had gotten Cokes and we all noticed how bad they tasted. We decided we had to tell them something was wrong with their machine. So as the three of us began marching over to Burger King, a chemotherapy nurse asked us what we were up to. When we told her, she reminded us that our sense of taste was being altered by the chemo. They tell you what to expect, but you usually forget by the time it happens,” she laughs.

Laughter also helped her get through the battle of the wigs. “As I faced losing my hair, I thought if I gotta do it, I might as well have some fun,” says Brown.

She visited a local shop that sold wigs and was told by the male sales staff that she had a big head. She picked out a wig and then waited for it to arrive. When she picked it up, she was given no instructions on how to care for it or properly wear it.

“I didn’t know that you shouldn’t brush a wig with a hair brush,” laughs Brown today. But in the moment, it wasn’t funny. The hair brush became tangled and Brown recalls tossing the wig across the room, hair-brush and all. Then she called her stylist.

“She had never styled a wig, and it’s different than cutting human hair,” says Brown. “She tried, but it was bad.”

Finally Brown found a local shop that specialized in helping women who were recovering from cancer. The staff helped her try on several colors and styles. Brown ended up with a wig that was close to her own hair color but a little longer in length. “It was me,” says Brown.

Not opting for reconstruction, Brown also navigated the world of prosthetics. Again, the local shop helped her try lots of options to find the perfect fit. “I got the economy model, but it still cost me \$500!”

Brown couldn’t wait for the first of November when her final treatment would take place. She felt if she made it to that point, she could make it. She continued to work throughout her treatment “so that I didn’t have to face it. It’s when you get home that you think about it,” adds Brown.

When treatment ended, Brown felt the worst was over. But then she suddenly began thinking more about death and her prognosis. She talked with an oncology nurse who told her that her feelings were perfectly normal and would lessen over time, and they did.

Brown never thought about her cancer, except on her anniversary date. Then three years ago in January, a routine mammogram indicated cancer on the left breast.

“The memory of chemo was as fresh as the first time I went through it,” recalls Brown at being told that cancer had returned. She underwent another mastectomy but additional treatment was not needed.

With her second diagnosis, “I wasn’t sure I could handle it again, especially the chemo,” she says. “The most challenging part is the fear of not knowing what the outcome is going to be.”

But for all of her fears, Brown also sees her journey with cancer as a gift. “It has allowed me as an employee health nurse to empathize with employees as they face terrible things in their life. It allowed me to open a

door. I never hid the fact that it was going on. They know I’ve been there.”

That knowledge has led others to ask Brown questions and empowered her with the answers – or at least an understanding. Recently five employees were diagnosed with different cancers within one week.

“I woke up in the middle of the night with the idea that I would invite them for big cookies and punch. They could come if they wanted to talk and meet the others who were experiencing a similar diagnosis,” says Brown.

All but one arrived at Brown’s door. They asked a lot of questions and stayed in touch with each other.

“With my first diagnosis, there were three of us who got through it together,” says Brown. “I felt it was important to know that there’s someone else who is in it right now.”

She also is a firm believer that women need to get mammograms every year. Brown had no family history and neither cancer was detectable through self breast exam. She also believes that each person deals with it differently.

“You have to find your own way to deal with it,” says Brown. “For me, I knew if I didn’t laugh about it, I would just cry. I leaned on my family at home and at work. We leaned on each other.”

