

# Breast Cancer Wellness MAGAZINE

*Be a Thriver!*

***"My heart and intuition kicked in. I took the biggest leap of faith."***

*—Paula Holland De Long*

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# What's Next for My Life? Thriving Instead of Just Surviving!

by Paula Holland De Long

I was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was 37, in January of 1997. Before my diagnosis, I thought I was successful but I was dying inside. Cancer was the big wake up call for me. Through this dark night of my soul, I faced the unthinkable prospect of an untimely death and came out into the light physically flawed but more vitally alive than I have ever been.

The experience of diagnosis, surgeries, and chemo granted me permission to choose for the first time in my adult life. It forced me into brutal honesty with myself, people I love, and to question my purpose for being alive. This forced honesty created purpose and clarity for me beyond my wildest dreams.

Cancer took away my marriage, and led me to my soul mate. Cancer forced me to admit that I hated my career, and inspired me leave it and pursue my passion. Cancer gave me the strength to truly believe that I could do anything, and gave me the gift of allowing people to help me do it.

Like many of you, one day I was living my normal life and suddenly four weeks later I was in a hospital minus my left breast, wondering what had hit me, afraid I was going to die. I had noticed a painful lump in my left breast so I mentioned it to my doctor during my annual physical. She assured me it was probably nothing since I was young, healthy, and had no history of breast cancer in my family, but suggested a mammogram just to be sure. The next thing I knew I was sitting in a surgeon's office hearing the words, "I'm sorry but you have breast cancer. You need surgery as soon as possible."

Terrified and not knowing what was next for my life, my shock and disbelief had barely sunk in before I was living it. I remember the pain and fear of not knowing what was going to happen. The shock when my lumpectomy came back

with "bad" margins, necessitating a mastectomy the next week. Facing the idea of losing my hair during chemo. Having to decide about having reconstructive surgery or not. Facing my fear of dying. Wondering what I had done to deserve having my life turned upside down How could this be happening to me?



*After 8 years of being afraid to try, Paula made it to the top of the wall, cheered on by 7-year old oncology patients at the summer camp Paula ran.*

I remember the tedious numbness while putting one foot in front of the other during chemotherapy. Keeping my "I'm fine" face on and my wig straight in 90 degree heat and 90% humidity. Trying to be superwoman in a time when I could barely get out of bed. All of my focus was on reaching that magic time when this cancer stuff would end and my life could go back to "normal".

Several surgeries and four rounds of chemo later, my treatment finally did end. Everyone was so thrilled that I was "done" with cancer. But I didn't feel excited. I was exhausted, bald, weighed 95 pounds, had scars all over my body. I slowly realized that I didn't know what normal was anymore.

Before cancer, I thought I would be happy when I got a promotion, finished everything on my to-do list, or made things easier for other people. If something needed to be done I did it. If someone else wasn't doing it "right" I fixed it. I worked 60+ hours a week and came home cranky and exhausted. I was always striving for something but never taking any time for me. My life was full of have-tos, shoulds, and musts.

My logic was fuzzy but my intuition was speaking the truth to me. The stuff I got and the things that I achieved didn't take care of me when I was sick, love me when I was wrong, or provide inner peace or appreciation for what I did and who I was. In fact, my life before probably contributed to making me sick. Before long, I had to admit things that seemed so important before cancer didn't matter now. The truth was, I wasn't thrilled to have my old life back. Something was wrong and I had no idea what to do about it.

Some serious soul searching began. An inventory of my life was long overdue. I thought about what things brought me down, zapped my energy, or made me feel bad about myself. It became obvious that I had a whole lot more negatives in my life than positives. At that point, consciously and subconsciously, cancer became a great motivator for me. I knew in my heart I had no choice but to power up and try some new ways of living and being. I really did wonder what was next for my life.

I decided to start with things that made me feel good, made me feel alive,

things I was drawn to. Spending time outside every day, enjoying time with the people I loved, listening to healing meditations were really, really resonate with my heart and spirit. I quit committing every single minute of my day to things that I HAD to do or SHOULD be done. I wanted some peace and joy in my life. Like many survivors, I wanted to thrive rather than tolerating the things that made me feel numb.

Listening to my intuition, I decided to take a lower paying, mid-level job instead of going back to my high stress executive position in advertising. I started gardening and walking the dog. Pretty soon my husband was asking me "Who are you and what have you done with Paula?" (He didn't mean that in a positive way). I was feeling better by then, but I still kept wondering "what's next for my life?" and feeling "there's got to be more."

I started to truly heal when I was trained as a Reach to Recovery volunteer, about 18 months after my diagnosis. (Reach to Recovery is an American Cancer Society visitation program where breast cancer survivors visit newly diagnosed patients.) This training was my first contact with other women who know what it is like to face cancer and death, and come out feeling happy and inspired. Their strength, compassion and honesty opened my heart in a way I had never felt before. Suddenly, I wasn't alone with my cancer anymore; I had a family of women who understood all the big and little things that I was struggling with. They told me I could get a prosthesis to fill up the empty hole in my bra. They showed me that my frustration with going back to my old life was okay. And mostly, they gave me the courage to say "no" to negativity and "yes" to choosing a happy, joyful future on my own terms.

Over the next year I visited 3-5 newly diagnosed women each week. Every time I met with them I could see their faces light up when their eyes inevitably went to my chest and my smile. When we met they were fearful, lonely and afraid. Who wouldn't be? Their normal life had suddenly been stripped away. When I left we were hugging each other and they had hope because if I got through this they could too. I became stronger and more confident myself every time I was able to help one of these women. I was beginning to thrive.

Things were still rocky in my personal life. My husband and I had grown apart, and my job, although less stressful, still left me empty and unfulfilled. Again my heart and intuition kicked in.

I took the biggest leap of faith of my life. Over a four month period my husband and I parted (amicably); I gave notice to my job; bought my own house; and started my own company. Everyone thought I was crazy, or having a mid life crisis, and maybe I was. I did know in my heart and my soul that I was doing what I was meant to do, and I was powerless to deny it.

So there I was. No husband, no clients, and a looming mortgage payment, trusting that somehow God and I would figure it out. The voices in my head were screaming things like "You're

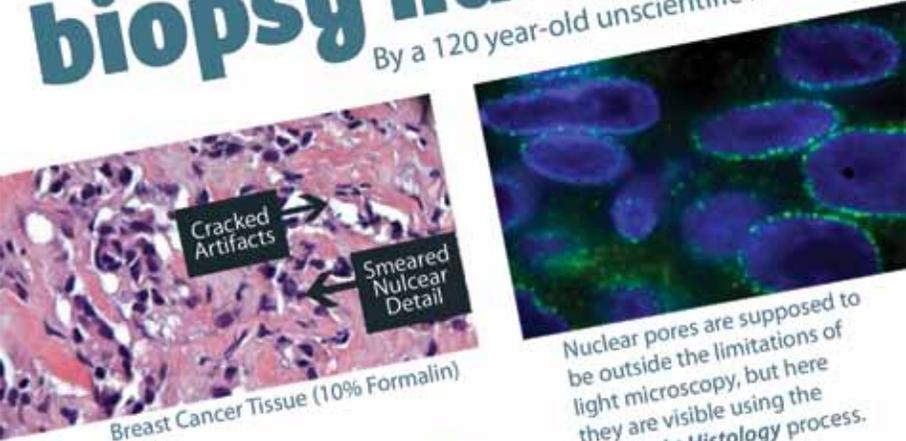
too old to start over. You only have one breast; no one will want ever want you again," and "you're going to fail and be living in your car."

I gathered up my courage and asked my employer to become my first client. I was shocked when they agreed. The before-cancer Paula would have been afraid to ask.

Other friends and connections from my career in advertising hired me on a freelance basis. I expanded my volunteer work with the American Cancer Society. Within a few years, the American Cancer Society had become one of my biggest ▶

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clients. I had followed my heart and successfully created my own company!

I also had a wonderful new man in my life. Convinced that my scars made me undesirable, I had been afraid to date. But when I told Chuck about my breast cancer, he took my hand, put it to his heart and said "I don't care. I love all of you just the way you are." Soon we were married.

I was happy, healthy, and thriving in ways that had never been possible before my diagnosis. Before cancer I was overworked, overstressed Type-A person who had no appreciation for anything. I was crystal clear and very vocal about what didn't work, what was wrong with my life, or other people's choices. Unknowingly, I had been living my life as a victim.

Cancer had turned me into a woman of choice, gratefulness, and joy. I never dreamed that I could be so happy.

My higher power still had plans for me. A new passion was calling my name. By then I had worked with hundreds of cancer survivors, children with cancer, and their families and loved ones. I saw them struggle with the emotional and practical realities of the disease. I realized how much so many people I'd worked with were truly changed emotionally and spiritually. Cancer had



*Husband Chuck and Paula celebrate after walking the Survivor lap at the Parkland, FL Relay for Life.*

awakened an urgent need to make the most of the time they had, and to give back to others. It was the "how" of doing it that challenged them.

I also gained a healthy respect for the many wonderful oncology health-care professionals that do a fantastic job of treating the medical aspects of cancer, and how they tried to help their patients with the same emotional and practical challenges that I had faced. But I knew there was more I could do. It had taken me three years of strug-

gling with my emotions to get my life back after my cancer treatment ended. That's too long. I knew in my heart that I was meant to help.

I was drawn to an emerging field called life coaching. I realized that coaching could be a powerful tool to help people with cancer and decided to start my career over and be trained as a coach. Coaching was all about making changes and living with purpose and passion. About living with a focus on what matters most to each individual, not what society or others think happiness should be. This idea was really resonant with me. After all, that's what I had done for myself.

I had been toying with the idea of creating a life coaching workshop that would help patients who were ending treatment rebuild their lives but I didn't think I could do it. Again, my higher power stepped in. At my very first coach training I met a doctor, Mike Bauerschmidt, from my home town who knew an oncologist who agreed to test my idea. Within six months, we had done two pilots of the *What's Next For My Life?*™ workshop for patients who were ending treatment. We began bringing the workshops to cancer treatment centers and support organizations



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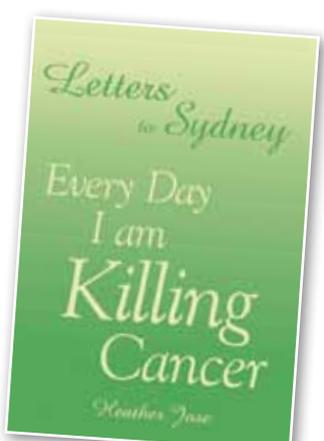
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like Gilda's Club in south Florida. We focused on helping patients realize that their emotions were normal and natural. We taught them how to explore their personal values and bring them into their day to day lives. Survivor after survivor reported huge increases in their feelings of acceptance, personal empowerment, and ability to make decisions and take action. Once again, my faith and passion were expanded, and my happiness and gratitude soared.

I was doing the work I was meant to do and loving every minute of it. My second company, What's Next For My Life, Inc. was launched. My connection with my higher power was growing. My life was more balanced between work, love, giving back and having fun than ever before.

The last few years have been the happiest of my life. I'm still working with survivors and finding new ways to support them. I believe that cancer is a wake up call, a reminder that thriving is about being our own unique selves, and actively working to make the world a better place, one small or large step at a time.

My mantra has become, "Why wait and why worry?" My courage is based on the absolute conviction that if I can do cancer, I can do anything. My new-found way of showing up in the world is based on compassion for myself and others, with excitement and curiosity about what we can do together, rather than alone.

Dealing with cancer and all of the changes it forced on me inspired me to contribute to the world instead of standing on the sidelines. It wasn't easy. It was definitely worth it.

As I finish writing this story, I'm singing out loud to one of my favorite songs. The line that resonates in my heart says "I can be myself now finally, in fact there's nothing I can't be." I wish this for each and every one of you. ■

*Paula Holland De Long CPCC, ACC - President/Survivor Life Coach, What's Next For My Life, Inc. Cancer survivor, certified life coach, author, and speaker Paula Holland De Long CPCC, ACC, is an authority on how the lessons of survivorship can bring joy, passion and purpose to anyone's life. Her first book, the What's Next For My Life? Companion Journal for Cancer Patients has just been published. Her workshops and classes are offered at cancer treatment centers and support organizations. Her teleconference groups attract participants from around the country. Call 954-565-6894, or visit WhatsNextForMyLife.com for more information.*

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