

"SO MANY WOMEN ARE SURVIVING THIS"

That's what Brandyn Barbara Artis wants others who've had breast cancer to know. To convince them, she tells *her* story—in an unusual way. **By Anne Cassidy**



She bounds on stage in a big white dress that swirls around her like a cloud. She is radiant and willowy with short-cropped hair and nut-brown skin. Her name is Brandyn Barbara Artis. She has one breast.

This is not something you would notice about her. But the title of her one-woman play is *Sister, Girl: One Woman's Battle with Breast Cancer*. And in it, she shares the fear, anger, sadness, and ultimately, the strength that breast cancer brought her.

"The mammogram isn't conclu-

sively slowly leaking out. The nurses bring him another gurney and lay us side by side. We try to hold on to each other as best we can. Seeing him that way is as scary as being told, "Yes, it is malignant." Have I done

something wrong? Teed God off?"

She steps to the edge of the stage, raises her hands above her head, and shouts out the letters: M-A-S-T-E-C-T-O-M-Y! As the "Y" lingers in the air, it becomes a question: Why? The mostly female audience at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., heaves a collective sigh, and women reach nervously toward their chests. Some here have had mastectomies; the rest of us wonder, will our turn come some day?

In an interview after the play, Brandyn talks about why she wrote and performs it. "I'm just an average woman who was diagnosed with breast cancer, had a mastectomy, and is doing fine. There are so many people surviving all this. That message needs to be emblazoned everywhere." If a woman knows she can survive, Brandyn says, she will be more likely to get a mammogram and examine her breasts regularly. And doing those things may make the difference between life and death.

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"JOYFUL TO BE ALIVE"



ANN JILLIAN



BETTY FORD



OLIVIA NEWTON-JOHN



VIRGINIA KELLEY



LINDA ELLERBEE

Q How can a woman be sure that her pathology report is correct?

A A trained pathologist looking at a frozen section can usually tell quickly if a tumor is cancerous. Occasionally, it is a tougher call, and the pathologist will wait to review the permanent sections that are available 24 to 48 hours after surgery. A woman certainly can request that other pathologists review the slides.

—Sally Knox, M.D.

sive. A biopsy must be performed. Anxious to have it over and done with, joking with the nurses, I tell my husband, Larry, not to worry. I'm lying groggy but composed on a gurney in the recovery room when we hear what the doctor has to say. My husband crumples and I hear a sound as if someone had punched him hard in the stomach and the air

ANN JILLIAN, 43, had both breasts removed eight years ago and elected not to have breast reconstruction. "I'm feeling more comfortable than

ever with my choice," she told an interviewer last year, a few months after she and her husband had welcomed son Andy Joe into their lives.

BETTY FORD, now 75, was one of the first well-known women to disclose that she had breast cancer. It's been nearly 20 years since she helped increase awareness of the importance of regular checkups.

OLIVIA NEWTON-JOHN, 44, discovered a lump in her breast in June of '92 and had a partial mastectomy and reconstruction. "I am joyful—ecstatic—to be alive," she said.

VIRGINIA KELLEY, the 70-year-old mother of President Clinton, underwent a mastectomy three years ago, followed by chemotherapy and radiation.

"It's another lease on life, as far as I'm concerned," she told a group of breast-cancer survivors earlier this year.

LINDA ELLERBEE, 49, was diagnosed with breast cancer a year and a half ago and had both breasts removed. "I don't feel like a survivor," she wrote in a newspaper article this year, "I feel like a victor."



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news. Her grandmother had died of cancer at 35. Her uncle and father had also succumbed to the disease. Because of her family history, Brandyn took good care of herself. She had annual mammograms and did regular breast self-exams in the shower. It was during one of these that she discovered a lump in her right breast.

“I didn’t act on it immediately because I tend to have lumpy breasts,” she explains. But when it didn’t go away in a few weeks, she went to her doctor. He sent her to a surgeon, who aspirated the lump in his office, told her it was a cyst, and said not to worry. She sought a second opinion. Again she was told, “Don’t worry.”

“I coasted on that for a year,” she says. “But I knew something wasn’t right.” A year later she went to another doctor. That’s when she heard the diagnosis that changed her life—a malignant lump in the right breast. The prescription: an immediate mastectomy.

The surgery was scheduled for Christmas Eve, and Brandyn had never felt lonelier. “No matter how protected you are, how many people are around you, no one but you is going into that operating room and coming out without a breast.” She was terrified of losing not just a part of her body but life itself. “I kept thinking, ‘They’re going to find cancer everywhere.’ That’s what happened with my father two years earlier.”

But Brandyn’s cancer had not spread. When she woke on Christmas morning, she felt reborn. The pain was excruciating, she had tubes coming out of her chest, and her right arm was rendered temporarily useless. But she was alive!

“‘Persevere’ became my motto,” Brandyn says. That vow helped her throughout her ordeal, especially when the early elation of survival became the dull ache of recovery. Ahead of her lay months of physical therapy as she learned to use her right arm again.

Although the cancer had not spread, her doctor ordered nine rounds of chemotherapy as extra insurance against its return. Brandyn found this worse than the disease. “For me, looking and feeling normal was part of my healing process. I didn’t think something that caused me to hallucinate could be good for me.” After three rounds, she told her doctor no more. Reluctantly, he agreed. “I think that if your core, your being, is not intact, nothing else will help you,” she says.

Her first job back after surgery was playing a nurse on *Dynasty*. Because she was not yet healed enough to wear a prosthesis, she stuffed heavy foreign coins into the empty cup of her bra. She worried that the microphones would pick up the jingling of the coins. They didn’t. But she learned that even breast cancer has a light side!

She wrote about all of this—the funny *continued on page 74*

SURVIVING CANCER

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This is an especially important message for African-American women, she says, “because we’re dying of breast cancer more and faster.” The number of black women dying from the disease is up almost 18 percent since 1974, compared with an increase of two percent for white women during the same period. Among the many reasons for these

grim statistics: poor access to mammograms and lack of education about the disease. By the time many black women are diagnosed, the cancer has spread.

Brandyn was in her early forties when she learned, in 1987, that she had breast cancer. An actress based in Los Angeles, she’d appeared in *Dynasty*, *Knots Landing*, and other TV shows and had won an award for her starring role in the play *Letters to Harriet Tubman*. Her life was just about perfect. “I had the man of my dreams [her husband, Larry Bunker, is a successful studio musician], the daughter of my dreams, the house of my dreams, even the dog and cat of my dreams.” Then, suddenly, she had cancer too.

She wasn’t totally unprepared for the



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SURVIVING CANCER

continued

moments and the despairing moments—in a journal. It was after she had shown the journal to a friend, who offered to help her get it published, that she thought about turning it into a play. After all, drama was her medium. And now, surviving breast cancer was her message.

Today, Brandyn flies all over the country performing *Sister, Girl...* in theaters and church basements, in community centers, and on university campuses. Often, she accepts only her expenses as payment. She wants to take the play into prisons and other places where women have never seen theater. "There are women out there who don't think about their own health because they're more concerned about where the next loaf of bread is coming from," she says. "They say, 'If I take a day off work to get a mammogram, I'm going to have less money to feed my family.'" She knows their problems cry out for political and economic solutions. But she also knows they must learn

Q Where are we with our understanding of nutrition and breast cancer?

A We've got good data now about certain things in the diet that tend to be immune-enhancing and certain things that tend not to be immune-enhancing. There are no absolutes, but there are epidemiological trends that take much research. Where we are now is what the American Cancer Society is saying: We should cut down on total fat and increase the total consumption of fruits and vegetables. We should also eat a variety of fiber, not drink a lot of alcohol, and not eat a lot of spicy or pickled foods.

—Nutritionist George Liepa, Ph.D.,
Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas

enough about the disease to recognize the symptoms and then must get over the fear that prevents them from seeing a doctor.

When Brandyn's play is over, women in the audience cluster around her. She has touched them in a way no statistics or doctor's warnings can. She's made them less afraid of the Big C and more willing to get a mammogram, examine their breasts, or (as one audience member admitted) see a doctor about a lump that's been there for years.

Brandyn herself has had three more operations since her mastectomy, all to remove cysts that proved benign. She has passed the five-year mark, a real hurdle for a cancer survivor. And her writing continues: In addition to the play, she has written a novel and some stories. "None of this would have happened if I hadn't had cancer," she says. "It's not easy talking about myself in such a personal way. But I feel obliged to do it. I feel so blessed for being allowed to linger here a little longer. I want to show my gratitude." ★

Anne Cassidy is a free-lance writer who covers health and parenting issues.

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