



a survivor's story



From the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre



Judy Sammut's story, as told by Meg Rynderman, a consumer representative for the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

July 2013

'There's life after breast cancer'

Judy Sammut

Looking back, Judy Sammut reflects that, if she'd had a mantra at the time, it would have been: 'There's life after breast cancer'. A simple phrase and one that she uses today, 20 years on from her initial diagnosis, when she speaks with other women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer.

I recently had the privilege to meet and talk with Judy who is a fit, vibrant 73 year old.

At the time immediately preceding her breast cancer diagnosis, Judy had been nursing her partner, making arrangements for her ageing parents and raising her university-aged sons. Her partner died on the day she received her diagnosis; she delayed her surgery to attend his funeral. Her father died three days after her surgery.

A regularly scheduled mammogram had flagged concern. What followed were days and months filled with biopsies, surgeries, infection, dealing with chemotherapy – all accompanied by the myriad emotions surrounding cancer and its treatment.

Over the next nine months Judy was confronted with a mastectomy and a reconstruction that would become infected, requiring the expander to be removed. A second attempt (a 'TRAM flap' reconstruction) would atrophy over time. Very soon after a lump was discovered in the other breast, requiring a second mastectomy. Six months of chemotherapy followed. During that time Judy took on the responsibility of her mother, who was suffering dementia and now lived in special accommodation.

Unable to work for a year and physically weakened by her surgeries, Judy relied on her three boys, her family, friends and in particular her next door neighbour, who, having also undergone mastectomy and reconstruction, understood what Judy was going through.

"My next door neighbour was great and my boys were fabulous; they were just amazing. They grew up a lot. Not only did they have to exist and work around university lectures, they had to look after me because I just couldn't do it."

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An attempt to return to work was aborted after nine months; Judy found it too physically demanding. With no back-up and limited income, changes needed to be made: "So I said to the boys, 'we're going to have to cut our cloth accordingly. We're going to have to pull in our financial horns and you're going to have to help me. I can't be providing, I'm going to have to go onto sickness benefits' and I did for just over 12 months. I didn't do anything. I stayed at home."

Judy's sons assisted her in many ways throughout this difficult time. They supported themselves from their part-time jobs and assisted with running the house, all the while studying for their degrees. One son, a physical education student, worked alongside Judy and her surgeon to create a personal exercise program. It was designed to strengthen muscles and tendons damaged by multiple surgeries. Another son, an electronics engineer, taught Judy to use a computer. Their support and these

new skills would help Judy find rewarding work that she could manage from home while she regained her strength.

Mixed emotions flood Judy's memories of that period. Putting aside the physical aspects, she remembers with fondness a double-edged relationship, which is understood by many families affected by a cancer experience – tears and distress balanced by black humour and laughter: "The crying is cathartic and the laughter is cathartic and it's bonding too."

Judy reflected on the need for clarity of explanation. She thought of the different ways in which members of a family hear the news and the information around cancer diagnoses: "You can deliver the same information to three people and one will receive it differently to the others. Not everybody in your family will understand what you are saying to them, because everybody receives it differently."

Fear of recurrence was never far below the surface. "I always felt there was a threat like little gremlins hanging on the peripheral vision of my shoulders. I didn't even have to turn my head. That anguish was very close."

But slowly, Judy's health, strength and confidence grew. Reassured by regular checks with her oncologist, she was able to resume part-time work.

The support network for patients undergoing cancer treatments was limited. Cancer-specific organisations and support groups were in their infancy and information was difficult





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to source. Judy sampled a number of support groups on offer and found them unsuited to her needs. She attended a session of the newly created YWCA Encore program. The experience would profoundly alter the course of her life. The program was offered freely to women post breast cancer surgeries. Judy remembers the “weekly program that was being run by volunteers that had learned some of the exercises. There was warm water pool work and there was a floor program.”

A funder had been secured to offer the program nationally. Judy trained as one of the first group of permanent Encore instructors, helping to develop the eight-week program still used today.

Making a difference through exercise and understanding has become a passion and a lifetime’s work for Judy. Eighteen years since that first

session, she still helps women affected by breast cancer through the Encore program. She has become a qualified Certificate III exercise instructor and delivers a number of exercise programs including the COTA Living Longer, Living Stronger program. Judy was also instrumental in establishing and delivering the Feel Good exercise program offered by the BreaCan drop-in centre. In addition, Judy volunteers for the Cancer Council’s Cancer Connect peer support program and offers her time as a Breast Cancer Network Australia community liaison.

Judy describes herself as a ‘topless model’ for fitters of breast forms (protheses) and bras when they are trained to assist post-mastectomy women. She recalls her own first fitting experience, after surgery, as two hours of excruciating distress. Judy shares her own, lived experience to encourage empathy and

understanding for other women.

She regularly shares her personal cancer philosophy with the women she meets in her exercise programs. She tells them: “It will be difficult and it’s awful going through it. But there is that light at the end of the tunnel and it’s not a train coming in the other direction. It’s the light that you need to be able to hang on to and it’s there and you will come out the other side of it.”

Judy is aware that each person’s cancer journey is unique. She describes her attitude to her own experience: “I’ve gone through it; I’ve gone through all the ups and downs and everything that’s prevailed in it. Now I feel mended. It’s like any medical issue that you’ve had to deal with – it’s been broken, now it’s fixed, it’s all mended. I’m now moving on and I’m doing other things. Yes, it did happen, but it’s not happening now.”



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Over 10 years ago Judy, along with many other survivors of breast cancer, took part in the Warrior Women project. The exhibition, made up of more than 100 images and pieces that emerged from a series of writing workshops, toured the country. Judy was one of the organisers. Her words eloquently describe her cancer journey:

My body may be damaged
but not my spirit

My breasts may be gone
but not my laughter

Chemo may crush me
but not for long

My hair might fall out
but not my hope

Fear may grip but gentle
hands caress

Faith may desert me
but family surround me

Tears may flow but so
does love

My cleavage may no
longer exist

But I do

'There's life after breast cancer' may not have been her mantra at the time of diagnosis, but it has become the philosophy by which Judy Sammut lives her life. "I sort of feel that there's been a reason for me to have had it so that I can do what I'm doing now: being the voice of breast cancer to women who are probably experiencing the same thing, but also informing others who haven't had breast cancer of what it's like. You know how you're on this earth for some particular reason? I think this is what I've been given."

For information and resources regarding cancer survivorship and self-care see www.petermac.org/cancersurvivorship/Home, www.petermac.org/CancerSurvivorshipandInformation, or www.ywcaencore.org.au.



Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

A Richard Pratt Legacy



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