

Messages of hope and inspiration

from women living with
secondary breast cancer



Breast
Cancer
Network
Australia





BEST WISHES FOR YOUR JOURNEY

When we hear that breast cancer has spread, it usually comes as a great shock. Thoughts of death and dying are often not far away. As you face this difficult time, we want you to know that there are many, many women living full and meaningful lives despite having secondary breast cancer.

A few of us offer our stories and messages here in the hope that they will give you the inspiration to face your fears and to live your life with hope and determination.

Other women's stories are available on Breast Cancer Network Australia's website: www.bcna.org.au. If you would like to send your story, please email beacon@bcna.org.au.

*From Breast Cancer Network Australia members
living with secondary breast cancer*



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KITTY

AGE 52, QLD




In 2008 my perfect life changed dramatically when I was diagnosed with secondary breast cancer. OK, I thought, I have been through this before, with early breast cancer in 1994, and it was fine. I can do this again.

But it didn't sound good. The pathology was triple negative, so more difficult to treat. And it was inflammatory breast cancer – that's bad! Fear took over – I was a mess. I lost control and for the first year was really, really scared.

I knew that fear was wasted energy and that it would not help me on this journey, so I gave it away – well most of the time! This disease can be such a persistent thing; I decided I would be too!

Slowly, with lots of support from those who really cared and lots of focus on healing and hope, things got better. I used yoga and meditation. I spent time with the people that I wanted to be with, those who made me laugh and let me cry freely when that was what I needed. I learnt to say no, although that's still a hard one for me.

Now my darling husband and I focus on doing the things we want to do. I have given up a job I loved, however, I am lucky that they let me work on a

A decorative graphic in the top right corner of the page, consisting of a cluster of pink, feather-like or petal-like shapes radiating outwards.

voluntary basis whenever I feel well enough. My husband and I have travelled overseas twice, and we visit our family and friends around Australia when I am between treatments.

There is always hope. Don't focus on statistics or words that people use that frighten you, they are just words. No-one knows your journey or how things will go in your life; there is always hope. Surround yourself with people who make you feel good. You can say no to things you don't want to do. Don't ever feel guilty about your diagnosis and don't say sorry - you have done nothing wrong.

When facing those dreadful days making major decisions about your treatment, breathe deeply, ask as many questions as you need, and don't feel pressured into a decision. Take your options home, discuss them with your nearest and dearest, take time to make a choice that is right for you ... and whatever you decide, have no regrets. You have made the best choice you could at the time.

Take each day as it comes. There will always be ups and downs, great highs and dreadful lows. That happens to us all. I think that, in a strange way, those of us with advanced disease are lucky - we know that the important thing is to enjoy today and to live as well as we can.

May your life be filled with much love, light and laughter.

TRACEY

AGE 48, VIC



I was diagnosed in February 2010, had a lumpectomy and axillary clearance followed by chemotherapy. A double mastectomy and tram flap reconstruction followed in November 2010 – and the discovery that my cancer had spread to my spine. Recently another large lump was found in my (reconstructed) breast. I'm on heaps of tablets, including oral chemotherapy.

However, I'm still very much alive and, with the help and strength of my wonderful husband and beautiful children, will remain so for a long time. I look at life differently now; trying not to stress as much and making the most of each beautiful day. I have my wonderful 'Pink Daughters' support group whom I adore and without whom I'd struggle to cope. People like these and other special friends get me through the inevitable tough days.

Being unable to work and having a chronically ill son also make it tough financially, but we manage to scrape through.

My message for you is never surrender. Fight for as long as you can, because a cure for this disease may be just around the corner. Love your family, friends and life with everything you've got. We're women; we're strong – and life is great.

MARY

AGE 65, VIC



When I wrote a message for the first *Hope & Hurdles* I was 58. I am now 65 and living a good life with secondary breast cancer. I was first diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer 10 years ago and secondary disease nine years ago. Over the last 10 years I have had ongoing treatment with seven different chemotherapies, two different targeted therapies, two different sessions of radiotherapy and a mastectomy. There have also been many other procedures and hospital visits needed to support these treatments.

My life has changed considerably over the last 10 years. I had to resign from my career in education. I am unable to actively participate in my team sports. I need a great deal of rest and have diminished energy levels. However, I still lead a fulfilling life. I am working part-time, volunteering with two organisations, and enjoy a very full social life. Retirement was very difficult at first but I am now able to manage and fill in my time resourcefully. At the moment I have a twice a week obligation to treatments but I am able to effectively organise my activities around these commitments.

Given that 10 years ago I was told by my oncologist that my prognosis was about two years, I feel extremely fortunate. However, I believe the longer I am able to 'hang in there' the more advances are made in breast cancer research. I have had extraordinary backing from my medical team, a support group for advanced breast cancer patients and my exceptional friendship group. I look forward to continuing a rewarding and full life for many more years to come.

MARLENE

AGE 53, VIC



When breast cancer first entered our lives in 1993 I introduced the concept of setting goals to get my family through the hard times ahead. It was difficult leaving my two young sons, Mat and Nik, when I had to move to Melbourne for four months of treatment, so once I had recovered I hit the road with my mother and sons for a road trip to Queensland.

2002 brought another diagnosis of early breast cancer – seven weeks of radiotherapy saw me once again leave my now teenage sons for treatment in Melbourne. A new goal was set – a trip to Darwin later in the year.

After my first diagnosis I had begun setting goals for my own private bucket list. I needed to survive long enough to see my children become self-sufficient. My second diagnosis identified a new goal: to see my sons in happy, stable relationships.

In 2008 I was diagnosed with secondary breast cancer. My bucket list quickly changed from a very private catalogue of goals known only to me and sometimes my sons, to a public list which family and friends continually add to.

Mat's goal was for me to be well enough to experience the beauty of Vanuatu. My private goal was simply to dance with him at his wedding. I ticked both goals off my bucket list in May 2011.

Nik's goal was to be financially able to whisk me away for road trips, wining and dining at a number of bucket list venues. Sitting with him, sipping coffee looking out over magnificent Lake Victoria is one of my favourite memories.

Now my close circle of friends regularly makes the commitment to spend time together. This can take many forms – a girls' weekend, a trip to the theatre, or simply a walk on the beach. We make time for each of these to happen.

Realising that our time is precious, I now schedule days with my parents. Overnight stays are penciled in and I look for special events to attend with them. Sitting watching my mother's face at an Andre Rieu concert is an image I will not forget. It was the opportunity for me to tick off an item from their bucket list.

My bucket list would not be complete without the inclusion of a very special friend. Kath and her family have welcomed me into their lives. Her home became mine whenever I underwent treatment in Melbourne. She has been my lucky charm, attending all my oncology appointments. Kath ensured they were celebrated no matter what the result.

Now, my list continues to grow. For every item we tick off, a couple more take its place. My private list now includes a wedding for my son Nik, grandchildren, 1st birthdays, 18th birthdays, 21st birthdays, Nana's day at kinder, engagements and weddings. This list expands as I find myself growing greedy.

None of us would ever choose breast cancer – but we can choose how we allow it to impact our lives and the journey we take.



JACKIE
AGE 48, NSW

My first diagnosis of breast cancer was with secondaries in my liver, spine and ribs. My liver had already started to shut down and I was a mess – physically and emotionally.

Telling my husband and children was the hardest thing I have ever had to do. Our daughter understood what cancer was but we didn't tell her everything – there are some things best left unsaid. Our son had a multitude of questions, most of which I couldn't answer at the time.

From the very beginning we knew we wouldn't have to face this alone. My diagnosis confirmed how wonderful our friends are: they organised a benefit night for us and a food roster after each chemo session. They sat with me, held my hand and cried with me. Our family was just as amazing – they were there day and night, ready to help at a moment's notice.

In the beginning we measured everything in tiny steps – would I make my daughter's birthday, Easter, Mother's Day, my son's graduation from school, Christmas, the start of the next school and uni year? That first year was very rocky. I don't remember much about it. I know how sick I was and I remember all the loving, wonderful people who were in our lives daily – angels in disguise.

Now that I am stronger, our goals are set in months and years, not days and weeks. We are currently working on 'Project Paris' – a trip to Europe, with a Pink Lady coming along for the ride! We have a 21st and a 50th next year ... all huge occasions to strive towards.

My message is simple: live each day the best way you can. If you feel good, go out and do something – even if it is just sitting in the sun. If you aren't feeling so well, listen to your body and rest.

I read somewhere that life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in an attractive and well-preserved body, but rather to arrive skidding in sideways – champagne in one hand, chocolate in the other – body thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and screaming 'woohoo, what a ride!' And that's really my message. Things happen in life and we continue to try and work them out, but can't come up with all the answers.

Set goals, write notes and letters, do coffee and lunches, make memories and take heaps of photos. Smile and thank God for every day that you are with your family and friends.



HELEN

AGE 63, NSW



When diagnosed with my primary cancer in 1997 at the age of 48, I became very pragmatic about the whole business. Although it was unexpected, I never felt shock or wondered ‘why me?’ In fact I thought ‘why not me?’ I was very sick with the chemo but recovered and got back to normal life.

I remember thinking at the time that I would never be able to deal with secondaries: I thought of that as a (fairly quick) death sentence. With each passing year, however, I felt that I would not have to face that hurdle. I had 12 years free of disease. There was a false alarm in 2008 which made me think ‘damn, I would like to have seen at least one grandchild’.

In March 2010 I got both the desired grandchild and a diagnosis of secondary tumours in my lung and hip. I reminded myself that I had wanted at least one grandchild and had achieved that, so I shouldn’t complain! For two years I have been on Arimidex and Bondronat, which seem to be keeping things calm – my scans are due next month to check progress, and I’m hoping they will be good. I feel too well for them to be otherwise! I have been enjoying my involvement with my granddaughter and am looking forward to the birth of a second grandchild, a boy, soon.

I retired at the beginning of 2010 and have just loved the freedom that has given me. I had a trip to Central Australia and to Europe last year, as well as doing the Sydney Harbour Bridge Climb, and am off to Europe again this year. Thanks to the very encouraging messages from women who have been living with secondary cancer for many years, and their positive attitudes to their lives, I feel very optimistic about the probability of enjoying plenty of years to come. Several of these women were at a more advanced stage than me and many were younger and yet they were all positive and making the most of their lives. I thank them for their strength and encouragement.

BECKY

AGE 54, ACT



Living with secondary breast cancer for 11 years has presented me with many challenges and many confronting situations, however, I try to:

- Live and embrace life – I've learnt that it's the little things that matter
- See the special meaning in all experiences
- Surround myself with good friends and family
- Make plans and goals for the future.

All the while living in the present and making each moment count.

ROBYN

AGE 62, NSW



I was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer in my liver and chest lymph nodes in October 2010. I began aggressive chemotherapy on the same day my third grandchild was born and received *Hope & Hurdles* shortly after that.

I could not bring myself to read the material for some months for several reasons. I was still caring for my mother who has mild age-related dementia and had to make arrangements for her care. It was only six months later, after organising this, that I had time and emotional space to think about myself and I began to read through the material.

I found it quite inspiring and, having passed the initial survival timeline given to me, I planned my own move to be closer to my daughter and grandchildren. Finding affordable suitable accommodation was time-consuming and the process took around six months.

Of course things were not smooth sailing with my health in those 12 months. The first chemotherapy treatment shrunk the tumours dramatically so apart from fatigue and hair loss, things were looking good. I was put on less aggressive chemotherapy but the tumours grew again; so treatment changed again. For the first time, I felt totally fatigued. Scans showed that this chemotherapy was not being effective on the liver tumour but the cancer in the chest had stopped growing.

At the same time that I moved house I began a new oral chemotherapy which I was tolerating well but life was not going to get easier for me. Four weeks after I moved I sprained my ankle severely, then two weeks after that I fractured two vertebrae in my back and spent a week in hospital. Scans after discharge showed blood clots in my lungs and both legs. Then I fell and broke two ribs. A new regime of narcotic painkillers and anti-coagulants was imposed on top of the chemotherapy. Without the support of my two daughters the next two months would have been impossible. The cancer seemed to be the least of my worries.

That said, I am now off all painkillers apart from paracetamol for my arthritis. I still need anti-coagulants but the last lot of scans showed the tumour in my chest had stabilised and the liver cancer had shrunk a bit. People say I look well. I certainly feel well. I remain on the oral chemotherapy with manageable side effects.

Eighteen months on from my diagnosis with secondary breast cancer, life is good. I do the things I enjoy (I have a cleaner now) and ignore what I don't enjoy. I am swimming, sewing, being an artist. I can babysit my grandchildren - my older grandson comes for sleepovers each week and I had the best birthday week I can remember to celebrate my 62nd birthday.

Having fought cancer since I was 29 - melanoma in 1979, breast cancer in 1990, 1992 and 2006, and now secondary breast cancer - I continue to fight and to enjoy life to the utmost. In 1990 I was given a two per cent chance of surviving 10 years. Twenty-two years on I am still here, still fighting and still enjoying myself.



DONNA

AGE 43, NSW

I am only at the beginning of my journey with secondary breast cancer, diagnosed in September 2010 at age 41.

I cannot say the journey has been easy, but it has been life-changing. I started seeing a psychologist 12 months ago for my insomnia. Although it turned out to be a dysfunction within the body which chemotherapy later fixed, it took me on a journey of self-healing and understanding.

Before being diagnosed with cancer I always sought an ordered, peaceful life. My mind told me this would give my family harmony and, through this, that I would be successful in motherhood and as a wife. As my health rapidly changed, I realised this achievement was out of my reach. Slowly, step-by-step and with lots of support, I set out to challenge my belief systems and find new pleasure in a life that I couldn't control. It has released me to experience much more pleasure within the family and allowed me to let other people step up in times of need.



Feeling powerless is very scary when you have cancer. Things I found empowering were:

- Taking part in making decisions about my treatment, together with my oncologist or surgeon. I found knowledge empowering and did a lot of research when I had trouble understanding things.
- Recognising the things that were in my control to change or influence.
- Keeping a positive frame of mind, using relaxation techniques, exercising, and allowing myself to enjoy pleasurable experiences.
- Choosing my diet carefully gave me some control over side effects of treatment.
- Power of prayer is amazing. Having hundreds of people praying is very uplifting. It gives hope and peace.

Before diagnosis I was chronically fatigued all the time and would focus on how to get through. Now I focus on incorporating into my life what brings meaning and accepting the days where I cannot perform the way I hoped.

Looking back I feel blessed with all the love I have been bathed in, and I am now looking forward. I have hope even though I don't know what lies ahead.

JENNY

AGE 66, VIC



I was diagnosed with secondary breast cancer four years ago. To say it was a shock is an understatement – I thought I was invincible. I accepted my situation fairly calmly, mainly because of the hope my oncologist gave me. While she was very clear there was no cure, she told me she thought I was still invincible and that there were a lot of treatment options available for me. I was diagnosed with multiple lesions in my liver. Surgery was not an option, so I decided that my best treatment plan was chemotherapy.

I had six months of chemo and went into remission for seven months, but the cancer then returned. I had another seven months of chemo but had to stop when I got pneumonia. After recovering from that, a scan showed that most of the tumours had gone so, in discussion with my oncologist, I decided to take a break from treatment. I had nine months of no treatment before finding that the tumours had increased in size and it was time to climb on the chemo merry-go-round again.

During my treatment I worked, and kept physically active by continuing Pilates and dragon boat paddling. When I stopped paid work, I continued working as a volunteer.

Although at first you feel like your life is over, it need not be. It is alright to be sad, angry, frightened and all the other emotions you will experience but I found if you let it come into your life there is also room for fun and laughter and love from those around you. I have done some amazing things I might never have done had I not been aware that my life would be shortened. My philosophy became to participate in whatever challenging or fun things came my way. I have been overseas twice, including a six-week tour of Europe and Turkey that nearly killed my husband but I found an energy I didn't know I still had! I have paddled in numerous dragon boat regattas in Sydney, Melbourne and regional Victoria and am very proud that I recently completed the Ord River Marathon dragon boat challenge. The most exhilarating thing I have done, however, was to climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge. I was terrified of climbing something so high. Reaching the top gave me a sense of achievement and a natural high that I will never forget.

I have found that the best gift you can give yourself is to surround yourself with people who will support you to achieve whatever it is you dream of doing, and who are capable of not only crying with you but, most of all, laughing with you. Use that gift wisely, whether it is whirling around like I do or just sitting still, and you will find your inner self and strength which will carry you through whatever may come.



AMY

AGE 42, ACT

I remember so clearly the day I received the news that I had secondary breast cancer; it will forever be etched in my mind. My oncologist wasted no time in getting things started on my treatment and it was all a bit of a blur.

I think it has only been in the last six months that I have felt like I am getting to grips with my 'new reality' – living with secondary breast cancer. And, yes, you can live with it and life can still be good. I even have times, sometimes a whole day, where cancer is not front and foremost in my mind. It is a great feeling.

I'm hopeful that I may be one of the women that live with this disease for a long time. At first I thought, 'Please, just give me one more year'. Then, 'Please, let me see my children start school'. Now, I'm greedy and I think, 'Please, let me see my children grow up'. As my husband says, 'You want to die with it, not from it'.

I am planning an overseas holiday with my family (although travelling with a 3- and 4-year-old will probably not be terribly relaxing!); we are starting renovation projects on our house which had been put on hold and I am planning next year's holiday to visit my sister in Darwin.

I am hopeful. And I think that counts for so much.



SHIRLEY

AGE 68, SA

To everyone with secondary breast cancer I would say: never give up hope. Enjoy each day and be open to new treatments and clinical trials.

My life changed in 1995 when, aged 51, I was diagnosed with secondary breast cancer in my lymph nodes, lungs and bones. After surgery, I joined a clinical trial involving stem cell transplant and very high dose chemotherapy, administered in hospital over three months, followed by radiotherapy. Despite the toxicity and many awful side effects, with the skill of my surgeon and wonderful support from my husband, family, friends and medical staff, I am alive and well 17 years later.

At no time did I ever contemplate not being around for a long time, it just wasn't an option!

Returning to the work I loved played a big part in my leading a normal life again – no time for cancer – and since retiring, we have had many great holidays in Australia and overseas. Life is great.

Good luck to you and be strong!

PAULINE

AGE 68, TAS



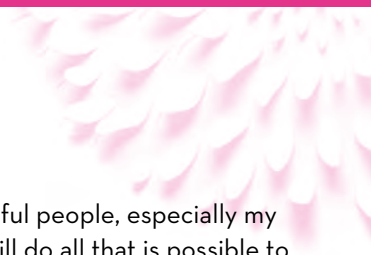
I am able to write this as a long-term advanced breast cancer survivor – how good is that!

My journey with breast cancer started in 1991. On finding the lump, I did all the right things: had a lumpectomy (with lymph node involvement), radiotherapy and chemotherapy. I was not greedy – I said I wanted 10 years. By then my youngest son would be 21.

In 1993 I developed a back problem. A bone scan found cancer in the lower spine. I now had advanced breast cancer. I was given a prognosis of two years and must admit that in 1994, two years was looking a reality. Thankfully after two years of treatment, I again got my life back.

And it was wonderful! The boys were growing up. My husband and I did lots of great trips, both overseas and in Australia. I celebrated my 60th birthday which, when I turned 50, I had thought I may not see.

In 2010 cancer returned again. It was a shock as I had no idea. The cancer had gone to my lungs. I was surprised but pleased to find how much treatments had improved since my initial diagnosis of advanced breast cancer 14 years earlier. I have treatment choices, and I am pleased to say that all is going well. I am now looking forward to my 70th birthday in a couple of years.



I am surrounded by wonderful people, especially my medical team who I know will do all that is possible to extend my life for as long as possible.

I feel I have gained from having breast cancer - I've met many wonderful people and have been able to make a difference to other women's lives because of my involvement with Breast Cancer Network Australia.

I started a breast cancer support group in 2005. It has been very rewarding. I have been involved with support for many years as part of the Cancer Connect program at the Cancer Council. I have often been connected with women with advanced breast cancer. One lady said to me: 'I just needed to talk to someone living with advanced breast cancer'. I feel I was able to give her hope.

I have been blessed with a positive attitude, for which I am thankful. I have always felt my story is a very positive one.

I figure there are worse health problems than breast cancer that I could have. At least we are given time. I am thankful for all the money that has been raised for research - that research has given us the treatment options we now have.

I have now been living with advanced breast cancer for 19 years. How I love every day and all the birthdays I've had, especially the milestone ones - they are very special.



AMANDA

AGE 39, VIC

I was diagnosed with secondary breast cancer when I was 38 years old. I was a young, vibrant, vital woman devoted to my husband and three children aged 4, 6 and 9.

Initially I felt great sadness and fear. I felt helpless and hopeless. I cried for my young family. The physical nature of my response to the news surprised me but I learned that allowing my emotions made room for something else – HOPE. My oncologist's first words to me were, 'There is hope; there are many treatment options we can try. We talk about secondary cancer as a chronic disease now.'

The early months were spent searching for information, learning and participating in a clinical trial. I was initially overwhelmed with information and choices about how I might approach managing this disease. I learned to meditate and I opened my heart to my spirituality. I soaked up the love and support of my family and friends. I decided that to live with this disease, I needed to take an active role – in decision making, in finding information, in making lifestyle changes, and in attending to my emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing. I researched information on diet, exercise and complementary therapies and have made decisions that I believe help me cope well with my treatments. I accepted offers of help and relinquished most of my home duties to focus on my

family and myself. I am so much more relaxed with the children now I am not stressed about getting the housework done!

Secondary breast cancer can put an incredible strain on close relationships. It is very difficult for those who love you to see you dealing with side effects of treatment and the reality of the disease; they feel such a sense of powerlessness.

My life has changed incredibly. I wake up every day thinking about cancer. I wake up every day happy that I am still here. I feel incredible sadness that this disease may mean my children will see me die before they are adults; that my husband and I may not grow old together. I feel incredibly lucky that I have an awareness of the fragility of life. I have a renewed joy in the simple things in life. We create wonderful memories together.

I have met many wonderful women living with this disease, many of whom have been living with it for some years. After feeling very isolated, I found a support group for women with secondary breast cancer. Meeting with them is like covering myself in a blanket of love, support and understanding. I take some comfort in advances in research and anticipate participating in more clinical trials.

I am learning to 'dance with devil' as the Chinese say. I am 'dancing in the rain, rather than waiting for the storm to pass'. I nourish my body with good foods, I meditate, I love being in my garden, I exercise, I love my husband dearly, I immerse my children in love and I accept the love of my family and friends without abandon. I live a mostly normal life and every day I still live with HOPE.

SANDRA

AGE 65, NSW



I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995. I had a mastectomy followed by six months of chemotherapy. It took me a long time to get my head around the diagnosis. At 48, I was not ready to face the fact that I had a life-threatening disease.

At the time of diagnosis, I moved from full-time to part-time work and, in 1999, my husband and I moved out of Sydney to the beautiful Blue Mountains – a move brought forward simply because of my cancer diagnosis. I didn't want to wait around for retirement age to do some of the things I enjoy!

We found part-time work on the mountains and life settled back down. I actually thought I had beaten the disease but, in 2005, it was discovered that I had metastases in my bones, lungs and liver. I started treatment for these secondaries but, for some months, my condition deteriorated until a pathology examination of my original breast tumour tissue (yes, they actually keep them!) revealed that I was also HER2-positive. Treatment with Herceptin began at once and, almost immediately, my tumour markers began to drop from a scary figure of about 1200 to less than 100.

For over six years I sailed along, enjoying my life and my pastimes (singing in a choir, sewing with my patchwork friends, yoga, bushwalks, bird watching with a mountains group, reading and some community work) so I was quite surprised when a new tumour was found in my ribs shortly before Christmas 2011. Happily, it was

treated with two weeks of radiation therapy and I am once again looking forward to each new tomorrow.

I have learned (more or less) to live from day to day and I like to think of every new day as a bonus. The thought of death no longer terrifies me, though I much prefer to stay alive. I can honestly say that I have learned to live with the uncertainty of life as a cancer patient. It certainly gives you a very different outlook!

JOY

AGE 55, VIC



Don't look forward and don't look back; just look outwards.

There is no denying that the future becomes dark and foreboding and the past is out of one's grasp as advanced disease spreads. I find this approach of staying very focused in terms of which moment I choose to live in helps me navigate the anxieties and stresses of my situation. Usually I can keep my boat upright if I just look outwards. When people tell me I am so strong, I laugh and say 'Strong. That is what everyone does when they run out of weak'.

I express myself using photographs that I have taken over many years, coupling them with words that capture my daily experience. This brings me into contact with my cancer and gives me vital images to use when under pressure from the disease or, more often than not, under pressure from the many treatments. I am on my own so I have to adapt tools and techniques to keep my boat afloat.

TRACEY

AGE 46, VIC



It is now March 2012. Seven years ago, on Australia's National Breast Cancer Day (24 October 2005), I was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. I was 40 years old. You could have knocked me over with a feather. The secondary was in my sacrum. What I didn't know at that time was that this did not necessarily mean my life was ending in the next few minutes or even the next six months. Once we hear the words 'advanced' or 'metastasis', we just crumble.

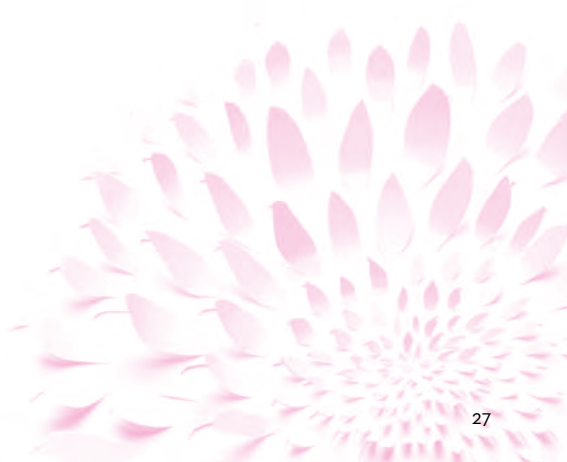
What I also didn't know was that the treatment options available to women with early breast cancer are also available to those of us with secondaries. While these treatments cannot cure us, they can help us maintain our health for a length of time. This might be a few months but can also be quite a few years, and we can still swap between treatments. I know this as I have swapped treatments and drugs since I was first diagnosed.

Most of the time since my diagnosis I have remained healthy and well, with few or no side effects. Even if I get a cold, I get over it far quicker than others in my family do.

Secondary breast cancer is a difficult thing to go through and you can feel lonely sometimes. You need to learn how to recognise when you are feeling low or down and find a way to pick yourself up. I chose to write a journal. I write exactly how I feel and get it all out of my system. The computer is full of my little outbursts, stories and feelings. They are a good reminder of how far I have come emotionally.

Breast Cancer Network Australia also has a website where you can put posts up about your treatments and side effects, and share new information and cyber hugs and kisses. It is wonderful and extremely helpful. It is great to be able to talk to other people who have experienced what you may go through with your treatments. The doctors can tell you clinically, but other patients can give you the facts.

This year I celebrate my daughters turning 20, 18 and 16. I will also celebrate my wedding anniversary of 24 years and in October it will be seven years since I was diagnosed. Not bad for someone who isn't supposed to still be here!



SUE

AGE 55, VIC



My diagnosis of secondary breast cancer in June 2007 came within a week of being told I had early breast cancer. I had just managed to get through telling my family and friends about my initial diagnosis, when I had to give them the news of the secondaries. I understood none of the terminology used by the medical people at the time so when I was told I had metastatic breast cancer or secondaries in my spine, pelvis and rib I just assumed it was part of the process.

When I received the *My Journey Kit* from Breast Cancer Network Australia I couldn't understand why the word 'journey' was used as it seemed a silly word. I wasn't going on a journey; I had cancer. But I have to say now that I have been on quite a journey and I'm still on that journey.

Along the way there have been lots of ups and downs and I have met some wonderful people. I have heard a number of people say they just want to get back to being normal again. I came to the realisation my 'normal' has changed. It is now 'normal' to live life around medical appointments, visiting the hospital, having medical people apologise as they try to get a needle into what were once healthy veins, sitting in the day oncology ward with an intravenous drip, and having my annual scans.

My message of hope is that life changes from the one you knew. You can still live a full life, but a different life. I can still do most of what I used to do. I still work four days a week. The important thing my journey has given me is the knowledge and the strength to support people close to me through their own journeys.





Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) is the peak national organisation for Australians personally affected by breast cancer. BCNA works to ensure that women diagnosed with breast cancer receive the very best information, treatment, care and support possible.

BCNA's *Hope & Hurdles* for women with secondary breast cancer is available from **1800 500 258** or **www.bcna.org.au**

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