

Breast
Cancer
Network
Australia



Messages of
Hope and Inspiration
from Women Living with
Advanced Breast Cancer

Courage, Hope &

*Determination
Courage, Hope*



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 advanced 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.

These and other women's stories are available on BCNA's website: www.bcna.org.au. In the future you might consider sending us your story.

Best wishes for your journey.

**Women of Breast Cancer
Network Australia
living with advanced
breast cancer**

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If anyone had told me that I would be alive in 2005, I would not have believed them for a moment. At 38 I was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a mastectomy. Three years later my family and I were absolutely shattered when secondaries in the bone and lymph glands were diagnosed. Radiotherapy and surgery followed.

I celebrate my 55th birthday this year, 17 years from the initial diagnosis and 14 years after secondaries. There have been setbacks but I live a good life.

My message of hope is this: If you receive a diagnosis of secondaries, don't automatically assume that you will die soon!! We are all individuals and while statistics guide our health carers, they are not a personal calendar.

Learning to live without fear dominating life leaves space for all the important things. Even with secondaries there's still a life to be lived!

There is such a sense of freedom and peace that comes when that fear is put to one side!

Live well.

Carolyn, age 54, Victoria



A diagnosis of breast cancer can be quite distressing – unexpected – out-of-the-blue. We can get through each day, every day just passes. After some time, each day brightens, the sun shines and life returns in a different way. It will not be the same, but there are endless possibilities about how to live our lives – new things can be explored. I now feel great pleasure and joy from being outdoors near the beach, rivers or the bush with close friends and family.

Learning that you have advanced breast cancer can be devastating. Somehow you get through the initial few months. One of my greatest inspirations comes from meeting other women with advanced breast cancer who are leading full and productive lives – on their own terms – for however long this may be. We can all continue to contribute – whether to our families, friends or workmates.

My story: I was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 47. Three years later I developed bone secondaries and began treatment. I went from full to part-time work, enjoy deep and close friendships and enjoy involvement with Breast Cancer Network Australia.

Jennifer, age 53, Queensland



I am an advanced cancer patient, but also a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend, and a breast cancer survivor. I am particularly proud of the last title, a survivor. I owe this to sheer determination, love and support of family and friends, and the support and expertise of the medical team that has surrounded me during this journey.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer in January 1989, I was 34, a busy wife and mother of two boys. Our youngest had just turned 4 and our 5½ year old was just about to start his first day at primary school. With this diagnosis I was admitted to hospital and had a mastectomy. The cancer had spread to the lymph nodes – six months adjuvant chemotherapy was to follow.

Three years passed and all seemed to be going well until August 1992. Metastatic breast cancer of the liver was diagnosed. The prognosis was not promising. This was the start of my journey experiencing various treatments to simply stay one step ahead of the cancer, experiencing many unpleasant side effects and waves of emotion. It was truly a challenging period.

I wondered if I would ever grow old with my husband and see our two young sons reach their teens.

In '98 a CT scan of the abdomen showed considerable deterioration of the liver. I was offered and accepted my first clinical trial which was six cycles of adjuvant chemotherapy. On completion of the treatment the cancer had retreated, but for only a short time, by the end of that same year I was offered and accepted a second clinical trial. This trial was a combination of intravenous and oral form of chemotherapy. Into the first three months of the trial my quality of life was

poor, emotionally I was drained, my body fatigued, but I kept telling myself, I have done this before so I can do it again, I have goals to achieve.

I was unable to continue with the full therapy due to side effects but continued with the oral form of chemotherapy for a period of 32 months. With the tumours in my liver reduced I ceased all treatment in July 2002.

It has been an extremely difficult and emotional roller-coaster ride but to date, I have seen my sons graduate from high school, shared their 18th, and another his 21st. I have celebrated my 50th and travelled overseas; we have achieved and shared many goals with family and friends.

Maria, age 50, Western Australia



Acknowledge what you have lost
Spend time grieving for what has happened
There is a time when you will be ready to move on
But not until you have come to terms with what has happened to you.

Be kind to yourself
You are not to blame
It was just bad bloody luck!

Buy yourself a small gold box with a lock
Into this box, place all your worries and lock it
Open the box once a day for 5 to 10 minutes
Worry then while the box is open
Close the box, and worry no more
Allow yourself to worry about your health and future
like this once a day
Don't ruin the rest of life with constant worrying
Life is too wonderful to spoil worrying about what
might be and what could have been
Celebrate what it is!

My story: I was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 37 and developed bone secondaries when I was 44. I've been treated with hormone therapy, radiotherapy and bisphosphonates (drugs to strengthen the bones). I work part-time and I continue to look after and enjoy my family – my daughter just celebrated her 21st birthday. I've been an active member of Breast Cancer Network Australia and the Breast Cancer Action Group Victoria for many years.

Fairlie, age 49, Victoria



Why stay home?!! This has been one of the best years ever. It has been a year of travel for me. First I went overseas to visit with my two sisters, my brother and their extended families. That was a great joy. My two sisters and I travelled together for a month so we shared old memories and created new ones.

After that I went cruising in north Queensland with my husband aboard a yacht. We set out from Mackay and have sailed through the Whitsunday Islands. I felt so fortunate to be enjoying the sunshine and walks ashore on beautiful islands. We enjoyed lovely swims and spotted dolphins, turtles and whales (fortunately no crocodiles!). Next year we plan to purchase a camper van so that we can explore inland areas as well as our beautiful Australian coastline.

I had a mastectomy in 1990, then a second in 1992. All went well until 1998 when metastases in my spine and ribs were detected. I continue with treatment but have determined that this will not consume our retirement years. My husband and I are having a wonderful time fulfilling our dreams!

Sandra, age 54, Victoria



Is there some magic trick that will give us hope when times look black? Without hope the road with cancer would be very hard.

My story is of a long road with breast cancer starting 22 years ago. After 17 years a secondary tumour was found in my lung and it was removed. I was sure that I would have another long break but it was not to be. One year ago I was diagnosed with cancer in my liver, lungs and bones.

So with all this involvement how can I say I have hope and determination to live for many years yet? I say 'How can I not?', because when I have my chemotherapy I'm surrounded by people who sit and joke while having their treatment, who laugh when talking about checking out palliative care centres! It is what inspires us all – the involvement with others who have faced the awful realisation that they have cancer – and then got on with their lives.

There are good things about having cancer; the people you meet who have the same problem as yourself and are there to support you, or those in the medical field who are there to help; the opportunity you have to help others just starting on their journey and who don't know what the future holds for them. All these things strengthen us and help us to have hope for our future.

So I can say to anyone who has found they have cancer and don't know how to cope – keep a positive attitude and be determined that you will rise above this time of trial. Live every day to the full and put the thought of cancer out of your mind if possible. It may still be there in the future but that is for the future and life is for now – to be enjoyed to the fullest.

Judith, age 69, Western Australia



I have recently come to realise that all my life I have tried to do far too many things at once. I would give 100% of my time and energy – or nothing at all. Then one day I found a lump on my left nipple. I tried to adjust to the change and all the treatment.

Not even 12 months had passed after finishing treatment when I received another blow – the cancer was now in several of my bones. Once again I have learnt to adjust. I tell people I now get around in 'second gear' instead of 'top gear'. I have found that life is more enjoyable when you slow down. I now make sure that everyday of my life I accomplish something – even a little thing.

It makes me feel good and it helps me feel like I have a purpose. I now am very content with trying to achieve a daily task. It may be something simple like mailing important documents, picking out some wool to knit a jumper for my soon-to-be great niece or calling in to see my son's teacher at school.

Women, all women know we are capable of so much, but why do we torment ourselves and take on so much? I am so very glad that I have learned to slow down. I have become a more conscious human being and I appreciate all the little blessings that come my way.

My story: I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1999. A year later I developed bone secondaries and since then have had a variety of treatments. I have two gorgeous boys and as I write this I'm about to embark on a trip to Western Australia with them by car, fitting my treatment in around it.

Linda, age 40, Victoria



My journey with breast cancer started in 1993, the year I planned to reclaim life with the youngest of my four children starting school. I had many life plans. Learning to play golf and learning how to swim were two goals. And to finally put all the years of photos into order ... (which I still have not done, nearly 12 years on!).

1993 was filled with surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

1994 picking up the pieces I worked hard to reclaim life but later that year my first recurrence appeared in the clavicle. Surgery and another course of radiotherapy followed. Mid-1995 my ovaries were ablated with radiotherapy which produced instant menopause.

In 1999 my partner and two youngest children moved to rural Victoria three hours from Melbourne to fulfil a lifelong dream of living in the country. I opened a small business. Life was great.

After seven years disease-free in early 2002 breast cancer appeared once again. I had bilateral mastectomies and spread was found in my right lung. (However, seven years passed prior to this re-diagnosis in which I was disease free). Unfortunately, due to my health I was forced to close the business.

Late 2003 I was again re-diagnosed. Bone metastases, with spinal involvement and pleural effusion in right lung. More radiotherapy treatment followed.

The road has been rough. The treatments have affected my quality of life. And I have been presented with challenges but I've learnt many valuable life lessons.

Breast cancer has brought rewarding aspects to my life. I started a breast cancer support group in our community. I'm an active member of Breast Cancer Network Australia being a member of both the Advanced Breast Cancer and Rural Remote Working Parties. I was awarded 'Citizen of the Year 2003' in our local community. I am a paddler/drummer with Dragons Abreast Bendigo. The friendships I have made and people I have met truly inspire me.

My message for you is:

Celebrate the most beautiful woman you truly are
Nourish your soul – it is the centre of your being
Appreciate every moment and live like there is no tomorrow

Do whatever it is for you that brings happiness to your life

Always have a dream

Find strength and courage to make your dream come true.

Judy, age 48, Victoria



We are unique and handle things differently but I think it helps to know you are not alone. There are many women living with advanced breast cancer. When first diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, at 43, I was pretty devastated and did not know of another woman with this diagnosis. My primary diagnosis was three years before. I grieved for my good health and the assumption of living to a ripe old age. I felt worried about not seeing my daughter grow up. Although my husband, parents, family and friends were very supportive, I looked for specialised support and found it in a support group for women with advanced breast cancer. Their toughness, determination and sense of humour inspire me to strive to live joyfully!

I remind myself that no one has a guarantee of living. Some people are killed instantly in accidents and have no chance to reassess their life. I have that chance and try to take nothing for granted now. I am determined to make the best of my life, no matter what. My glass is half-full, not half-empty!

Over five years on, with regular treatment, I strive to live a productive and happy life. This did not happen overnight, though. Gradually, I have made sense of my life again and accepted the treatment and the cancer. I have cut a lot of 'the crap' from my life. I refuse to let the cancer control my mind, my heart or my spirit. Sometimes I have down times, which is to be expected. However, being an active partner in my treatment helps me, as does the support of my fantastic husband and parents. I am also thankful to have seen my daughter turn 18 and work in a job she loves. Working voluntarily with Breast Cancer Network Australia gives me

satisfaction. I wish you hope, joy, peace and love for your journey! Find some other women who have metastatic breast cancer and share your experiences with them. Take each day at a time and make the most of it, no matter what!

Veronica, age 49, Queensland



I was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 43. I had a lumpectomy and axillary clearance (no nodes were involved) followed by six weeks of radiation. Life continued on as busy as usual. However, two years later I started my biggest life challenge. I was shocked to learn I had metastatic breast cancer, affecting my lungs, ribs and hip. The love and support of my family and friends was magnificent and somehow we got through those first few months. I experienced constant mood swings, sometimes feeling very low, then the next being very positive. I became very determined to beat this. After six months of chemotherapy, the results were good – no cancer was left. I went from full-time work to part-time. Other things are more important now. Cancer changes priorities.

A year ago I had a second round with metastatic breast cancer affecting my ovaries. I had a hysterectomy, and I'm now on tamoxifen and Bonefos (to strengthen my bones). I now work on a casual basis and I enjoy it. I also enjoy yoga. I have slowed down and have learnt to say 'no'. I'm probably happier and more at peace with myself – which is amazing.

I'm involved with B'r'est Friends, Look Good ... Feel Better and I'm the coordinator for the *Mini-Field of Women* in Bundaberg. I'm also a member of a support group for women with advanced breast cancer.

Dealing with the challenges of advanced breast cancer has been quite different from my earlier experiences with early breast cancer. I have needed to share my journey with other women dealing with the same diagnosis. Consequently, I would like to continue this process by sharing my experiences with other women who may also feel this same need.

My message of hope is:

Realise that life is a series of levels, cycles of ups and downs – some easy, some challenging. Look for the beauty in life, in people, nature and most of all in yourself. Take time for yourself to do the things you want to do and enjoy. Be strong and don't ever give up.

Lee, age 52, Queensland



When I was first diagnosed with breast cancer I was 37. My deepest concern was for my youngest child, who was nearly seven. She is now 27 and has two children of her own!

About four years ago, I got my first secondary breast cancer. I went into remission after chemotherapy. Then, at the beginning of this year I discovered that the cancer had spread. My latest course of chemotherapy finished about two months ago, and I'm getting on with my life again.

I'm involved in a lot of volunteer work. Currently I'm the president for Action For Breast Cancer SA and at the moment we run eleven support groups. We work closely with various hospitals to provide support to people with cancer. I'm the treasurer for the SA lymphoedema support group, and for the last nine years I have worked both as a volunteer and a paid staff member on The Cancer Council's Cancer Helpline. I have also been a Breast Cancer Support Service volunteer since 1983.

As I am a painter and potter, I started a watercolour workshop about four years ago for people with cancer and their carers. I find it so rewarding to see joy on the face of someone who thinks her world is falling apart, and has never attempted to draw or paint, who suddenly discovers it's something she can do after all.

So you see there is much life to be led, even when things seem grim. I always look for light at the end of the tunnel and keep on keeping on!

I live my life a day at a time, enjoy myself as much as I can and keep on learning new things all the time. I can't be optimistic all the time – but I give it my best shot.

Liz, age 58, South Australia



Even muddling through helped – through my numbness, various denials, bursts of energy, frustration. There is a way through the decisions, action, acceptance, treatment, consultations, side effects, scans, results, adapting all again. Saying yes. Saying no. Being clear. Feeling lost, reaching out, finding a way. Not knowing how – knowing somehow ... kindnesses. Being my own best friend.

I was diagnosed with bone secondaries in 1998 at the age of 40.

Jenny, age 46, Victoria



Every woman's journey with early breast cancer is different, and so it is with advanced breast cancer. There are several things that make my journey different.

My husband and I don't have children. I have never felt confronted by the disease – I don't have continual nausea, chronic or severe pain or other significant symptoms and have had good responses to chemotherapy and radiotherapy. I have never felt overwhelmed. Without any conscious effort I have broken each stage into steps, or 'bridges'. The information and knowledge which allows me to know the shape of the bridge and how it can best be crossed is important. I like to know what is causing a particular symptom, what it means, how long it will go on for, and what are the treatment options and likely outcomes.

I was diagnosed with early breast cancer in October 1999 and with metastatic disease with spread to the bones in August 2001. Since then I have had spread to the lymph nodes in the neck, bone marrow, and liver. Spread to other sites has been effectively controlled with chemotherapy. Since diagnosis of advanced breast cancer I have had three separate radiotherapy and five chemotherapy treatments. I have monthly Xometa treatments and currently take an aromatase inhibitor, letrozole, daily. Until recently I have been able to enjoy a normal lifestyle including work, social activities, and home duties.

Having breast cancer has created many opportunities. I have met, and continue to meet, so many friendly, generous and committed women.

I was fortunate to be chosen to participate in an Advocacy and Science Training Course in August 2001,

and I have been lucky enough to act as a consumer representative. Advocacy and representative work presents a challenge I enjoy and provides continuous learning.

Other opportunities include public speaking. The presentation that Judy Shepherdson and I did for an Advanced Breast Cancer Forum in October 2003 continues to bring accolades.

In 2003 I participated in the 'Inspirational Women' project in which women with advanced disease from around Australia participated in creative writing workshops by teleconference. Not only was it an amazing cathartic experience, but it also offered the opportunity to form friendships. I was invited to submit for publication in 'Heartsongs in the Key of C'. Being a published writer would never have happened if I had not had breast cancer.

However, life progresses. Due to the progression of the disease in the liver, I was informed recently that no further chemotherapy treatment can be given. My treatment is now palliative to treat symptoms.

For many months I had felt uncomfortable, suffering an extreme lack of energy and not being able to maintain any kind of life. I now know the dimensions of the bridge that I am currently faced with, feel much more comfortable, and can plan accordingly.

I resigned from work in adult and community education recently. This was very difficult to do. I am relishing the company of many good friends, and have become the queen of coffee and lunches!

I am not sure how much time I have left, it is likely to be a matter of months. I aim to stay well for as long as possible to enable me to continue enjoying the pleasant things in life. Whatever will be, will be!

Anne, age 52, Victoria



In 1996 I was 33 years old when diagnosed with breast cancer in my right breast. I had a mastectomy, followed by six months of chemotherapy. Two years after finishing my treatment I found an enlarged lymph node near my collarbone and was subsequently diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. Now in 2004 after numerous chemotherapy treatments I lead a reasonably active life while holding the disease with treatment every fortnight.

Since being diagnosed with breast cancer I have found out more about life than I ever imagined. My inspiration is my two sons, Luke and Sean, they are the most loving children and I am so grateful to be part of their lives. Sometimes at night when I kiss them goodnight they just stare into my eyes, it's a wonderful feeling. They have endured more than most children their age, now eleven and nine years old, but they have also gained important life skills beyond their years. I have a good support network especially my husband Andrew, a loving family and many friends. My close friends, Kerry and Tracy, are like guardian angels. They take time out of their busy lives to sit by my side, sometimes for many hours, while I'm having chemotherapy.

Sometimes we help other people without even knowing. One day I met a woman who said that when she attended her first breast cancer support group meeting some years ago, I smiled at her when entering the room and then sat next to her. She was very nervous and about to leave the meeting but felt welcomed and remained. She now leads her own support group.

This encouraged me to use my experience to help others through voluntary work with Breast Cancer Network Australia and The Cancer Council NSW. My main desire is to address issues for women with advanced breast cancer, raise awareness in young women and assist in raising funds for cancer research.

Ann, age 41, NSW



How do you tell people you have advanced breast cancer? Part of me wants to play with that word 'advanced' and say 'well I was always clever'. From being a late developer (puberty wise), I'm definitely the first of my friends to experience menopause at 41! And another part of me feels strangely guilty because I'm not at all unwell. My metastasis was in one spot in the bone and pain has been insignificant from the outset. Ten days of radiotherapy, a change in hormonal treatment from tamoxifen to letrozole, throw in a bit of bisphosphonates, visit the oncologist three-monthly, rather than six-monthly, but outwardly (and from my kids' perspectives) life goes on in much the same way as with early breast cancer.

But it is another world inwardly. Living with uncertainty pushes me to do things now, rather than procrastinate as I used to. However this only applies to enjoyable things, not the boring household activities! My grade 4 blue cellophane project on Venice became a real life experience. Forget waiting for the kids to grow up and be reasonable travellers – we all went on a great trip around New Zealand. I've always loved art, so I did a mosaics course and made a table which decorates our lounge room.

I try not to take work too seriously, adopting as my motto that famous line: 'No-one ever said on their deathbed "I wish I'd spent more time at work"'. I'm better at saying 'no' and have successfully negotiated to cut some of the 'crap' from my work day, such as certain meetings, and focus on the aspects I enjoy most.

I go to a weekly yoga class, have regular massages and my father does a regular 'healing' on me (nothing religious or way out, just a 'feel good' energy balancing).

In the past I've rarely joined organised groups. Now there are two groups which I find satisfying: Breast Cancer Network Australia and a support group. Through Breast Cancer Network Australia I can voice my feelings (and hopefully make a difference!) as a patient/consumer about the importance of receiving quality information, about the value of empathic health professionals and the need for patient-centred service delivery. From the support group I'm always picking up something whether it's information, affirmation of how I feel, or another perspective. At one meeting we spoke about what sustained us. It surprised me how similar our experiences were when it came to the impetus to travel, spend 'quality time' with oneself and with others, do something crafty or artistic that you've always wanted to do, and be kind to oneself.

There are bad days too – it's like grieving for someone, you never quite know when it will hit you. I'll be watching the kids achieve some milestone and get teary wondering if I'll be around for more. The plus side is that at times my enjoyment of the moment is simply exquisite. And my naturally black sense of humour has a permanent field day.

My story: I was on the cusp of 40 when I had a lumpectomy, lymph node involvement, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Then last year, at 43, I had a recurrence at T1 (in the spine between my shoulder blades) which was zapped with 10 days of radiotherapy. I've continued to work part-time throughout most of the above. I am married with two daughters (who were seven and nine first time around), a supportive husband, family and great friends.

Ilana, age 44, Victoria



My life has changed since being diagnosed in May 2002 with metastatic breast cancer at the age of 44 and it's taken me down a path I never knew existed. Before advanced breast cancer, my life was go to work, come home from work, go to sleep, go back to work. Humdrum. I very wisely decided to resign, and decided to spend the time doing stuff I want to do – not have to do. My house is messy, my cupboards are disgusting and I laugh as I just don't care. However I have read some great books, joined some interesting clubs, slept in, learnt new activities and spent a great deal of time working on my hobby of making leadlight windows. I would like to have all my friends and family receive something I've made, so I can leave a legacy.

Cancer is like a termite slowly eating away at the framework. It can also be seen as a chance to slow down and spend more time trying to reinforce the framework using other materials such as spiritual strength, personal strength, love and most importantly resilience.

My story: I'm married, with no kids. I was diagnosed with primary breast cancer in May 2000 and metastatic breast cancer in May 2002.

Kay, age 47, Queensland



I was diagnosed with breast cancer in August 1996. I was one month past my 49th birthday, two of our four children were married, and we had an eight-month-old grandson. My initial thoughts were whether I would be around to see this little boy start school, to see the other two kids settled and happy and to see more grandchildren born.

It is now 2004, I am 57, and we now have five grandchildren.

During the eight years since my initial diagnosis I have had two courses of radiation, and since 1999 almost continuous chemotherapy. Whenever one drug or drug combination fails and the tumours begin to grow again I start on another drug/combination. I am currently having a rest from chemo and I am about to begin my third course of radiotherapy.

During these eight years I have also had endocarditis which entailed five weeks in hospital on intravenous antibiotics followed by open heart surgery. I now have a prosthetic mitral valve which keeps my heart ticking over nicely, and now that my heart is working well I am physically much fitter than previously. I also had surgery to remove a precancerous tumour (unrelated to the breast cancer) from the end of my common bile duct. This tumour was detected before it became too troublesome, and this was entirely due to the fact that while on chemo I was having regular blood tests which kept showing some liver problems.

Despite these 'adventures' we moved house five years ago and have almost completely finished the very extensive renovations, established a garden and travelled overseas. We have also had several caravan trips and other holidays both on mainland Australia and in our home state.

Pat, aged 57, Tasmania



Mary, I can't believe this is happening to you.'

These were the first words and reaction of one of my closest friends in the horrendous days before and after I was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer. Here I was – a very fit, full of life, 55 year old primary school principal, playing weekly basketball, netball and golf and just back from a snow skiing holiday – with this devastating news that I had a rare and aggressive cancer. After the questions I quickly learnt that I could not have done anything earlier because that type of breast cancer cannot be detected until it presents as a swollen and sore breast.

As soon as I had the diagnosis and the knowledge of what was before me I decided that I was going to beat this 'by hook or by crook' and continue my life as normally I as possible while I was winning the battle. Although I have no immediate family I was extremely lucky to have an extensive network of friends to support me whenever I needed it (and even when I didn't!). To help me to come to terms with my cancer I started writing and recording my experiences – both on a daily basis and, in the form of four *IBC Journals* which I shared with friends, colleagues and anyone else who wanted information. For me, being public and open was the only way I was going to be able to continue doing what I wanted to do – lead as normally a life as possible.

I know I am not one to give up easily and am resilient by nature. Throughout the nine months of treatment (eight sessions of chemotherapy, full mastectomy and six weeks of radiation) I continued to work fulltime (except following my mastectomy) and be physically and socially active as much as my tiredness would allow.

Three months post treatment I walked away from a basketball game with an unusually sore back. After many physiotherapy visits and a bone scan an MRI picked up my worst nightmare – a tumour in the vertebrae in the spine. I now had to face having metastatic breast cancer.

At the beginning of this journey I always feared how I would cope if the cancer advanced. Although it knocked me for a six initially it was not long before I realised that, if I wanted to be a survivor, I needed to continue with a positive attitude and up to date knowledge about my condition. Within six months of finishing (what I thought to be) treatment I was back on the treadmill. This time was different though with weekly visits to the hospital for treatment. My determination to continue 'the normal life' meant that I organised to continue working part time as a principal and have done so for over 12 months now. I am well informed about my treatment and being the person I am feel like I am in control and on top of most situations that arise. I make sure that I keep asking the questions and deal with even the smallest issue – such as fingernails and toenails – so that things are not overwhelming. Yes, my lifestyle has changed – energy levels are lower, I don't say 'yes' so often – but I still have a wonderful quality of life. I work (and am really enjoying the challenge of part time). I have accepted that the weekly treatment is a positive not a negative (in that it is keeping me well). I am starting to think more of the future and planning those "adventures" (I can, and have, had a break from treatment). I still have wonderful supportive friends who, even nearly three years later, will quickly rally round when needed.

Yes, of course, I have my down times. However, they are becoming less frequent.

I know I am doing everything I can to fight the cancer both with conventional and complimentary remedies. I know that I have been extremely lucky with my medical team and the support I have had around me. I also know (although I would prefer not to have been through this journey) that I am a richer person for the

experience. I live each day to its fullest and treasure, even more, my friends and other people who I come across in my daily life. I know I will encounter setbacks in the future, but the advanced breast cancer I have (I refuse to use the word remission) is not going to stop me planning my future and enjoying the wonderful life I have.

Mary, age 58, Victoria

Breast Cancer Network Australia is the national voice of Australians personally affected by breast cancer.

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Messages of Hope and Inspiration from Women Living with Advanced Breast Cancer

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Since this booklet was first published in 2002, some of the women whose messages appear have died. We are grateful that they shared their courage, wisdom and example of purposeful living. They will not be forgotten.

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