

# Women of Courage

## Breast Cancer Survivors Offer Hope & Inspiration

*Outside of skin cancer, breast cancer is the most common kind of cancer among women. Yet anyone who has come face to face with a diagnosis will tell you that there is hope. In the United States there are more than 2.8 million breast cancer survivors—women who have completed treatment, or in the process of being treated. In honor of October's Breast Cancer Awareness Month, we share the stories of six local women whose lives have been changed by this disease.*

By Greg Thompson and Laura Childers



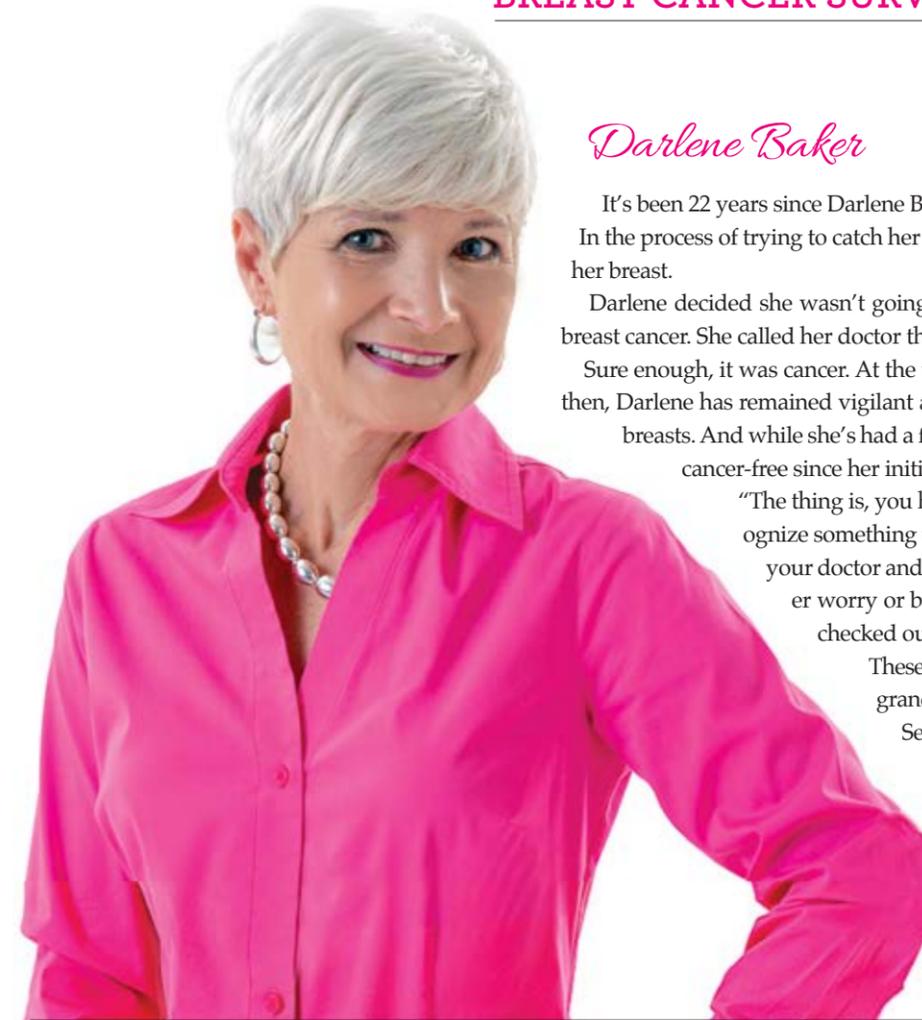
### Stacey Smith

Two years ago, Stacey Smith's doctor noticed a tiny spot during a routine exam. Age 33 at the time, Stacey was reassured by her doctor and others that everything would likely check out and there was no cause for concern.

Some two weeks after her initial exam, Stacey found herself on the operating table facing the reality of a double mastectomy. "It was a huge shock. It all happened so quickly," says the mother of three. "I was scared for my children and how they would handle this. Then you start thinking, 'Will they have a Mom when they grow up?' But I was just amazed at how God carried me through it."

Stacey and her husband, Chris, decided to get the entire family involved in her treatment and recovery. As she went through chemo, Stacey had her children—Jacob (age 11), Christian (8), and Lily (4)—assist with removing her hair as it fell out from her cancer treatments.

"We all got involved in it and we made it a journey for the whole family. It definitely is a journey," says Stacey, who has been cancer free for the past two years. "It was amazing to see all the people who came out of nowhere to support me. My advice is that there is light at the end of the tunnel. God does have big plans for you. He will carry you through."



### Darlene Baker

It's been 22 years since Darlene Baker developed a sinus infection that saved her life. In the process of trying to catch her breath one Saturday, Darlene felt something odd in her breast.

Darlene decided she wasn't going to take any chances—she had a family history of breast cancer. She called her doctor the following Monday.

Sure enough, it was cancer. At the time of her surgery, she was just 34 years old. Since then, Darlene has remained vigilant and keenly aware of any possible changes with her breasts. And while she's had a few anxious moments over the years, she has stayed cancer-free since her initial battle.

"The thing is, you have to know your body. You need to be able to recognize something that seems a little strange. Don't be afraid to contact your doctor and have things checked out. My doctor told me, 'Never worry or be ashamed about coming in and having something checked out that you're not comfortable with.'"

These days, Darlene keeps busy spending time with her grandchildren and volunteering with Cancer Support Services in Chattanooga. As a cancer survivor, she knows first-hand how support from others is an important part of the healing process. "They meet monthly and have different events throughout the year. Being able to talk to someone who has been through what you are going through helps each person in a different way."

### Joyce Dean

When Joyce Dean was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago she felt devastated. She knew with prompt treatment the disease was curable, but was shocked to hear that she now had it herself.

Fortunately, her cancer was found in its early stages. But it was sporadic. "My oncologist expressed great hopes for my full recovery, but he recommended a mastectomy. After hearing this I cried a few moments, but knew I had to look forward."

Joyce consulted with a plastic surgeon, who talked to her about reconstruction options. "As I anticipated the mastectomy, I wanted to also understand the alternatives that were ahead. I began to read about it more and pray and talk to my family and friends. That's when I finally started to accept it."

Joyce underwent her mastectomy in March of 2011, and has since had follow-up reconstruction procedures. To date, she is cancer-free and says she thanks God every day for His guidance, comforting, and protection. "If I hadn't been having my routine mammograms they wouldn't have found it," she says.

Since being diagnosed, Joyce has been a passionate advocate for early detection and screening. By encouraging mammograms, Joyce helped a close friend discover an aggressive form of breast cancer in the early stages, which probably saved her life.

"I will continue to tell other women to have regular exams and mammograms. These are things that definitely could save your life."



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*Renée Qualey*

In March of last year, Renée Qualey found a lump. “I had pain in my breast and I thought it was a cyst. I was surprised when I felt its size,” she says.

Working as a nurse at a hospital, Renée spoke with a gynecologist who referred her to another doctor. Then came imaging and, finally, a biopsy.

The results showed triple negative breast cancer. She remembers being out in the car with her husband before her diagnosis. “I knew it was cancer. He was like ‘Let’s just be positive.’ And I said, ‘We’ll face it just like we’ve faced everything in life.’”

Renée weighed her options and decided to go with a mastectomy. “I had a daughter graduating from high school 10 days after the surgery. It was overwhelming at times. You just have to get up and do. I just didn’t dwell on it.”

Right now, Renée is still in the process of chemo with eight more treatments to go. She says she’s extremely grateful for all the people in her life who have kept her going—her “awesome family, friends, and medical staff.”

“You have more perspective on things that make no difference in the long run. A cancer diagnosis makes you appreciate other things in life a lot more.

“When you are going through treatments and you begin losing your hair, it makes you feel grateful for the things you do have.”



*Vicky McKelvey*

Vicky McKelvey found out she had breast cancer last November when she went in for a routine screening. Her mammogram revealed her cancer was scattered inside the milk ducts—a type that’s impossible to feel.

“If I had not had a mammogram, I would have never known. It saved my life. It was just a routine checkup.”

Vicky saw an oncologist and was scheduled for a mastectomy the following January. “It was the holidays. My husband and my son were supportive throughout my journey too. I immediately put all of my faith in Jesus.

He held my hand through the whole journey. I prayed a lot.”

Today, Vicky is cancer free and she has finished all of her reconstruction. She goes back in November for a check-up.

“I remind every single female that I know and love to get her mammograms. I never in a million years would have known or thought it would happen to me. I have no family history and I am a very healthy eater.”

She says her faith is what got her through. “I wondered occasionally why it happened to me. Maybe I can make a difference in someone else’s life that needs to hear about faith and put their trust in God. God is there all the time, especially when you need him the most.”



*Jessica Richelson*

Jessica Richelson was diagnosed with breast cancer last October. She was then just 29 years old. “I wasn’t even old enough to get a mammogram! It didn’t feel like it was really happening,” she says.

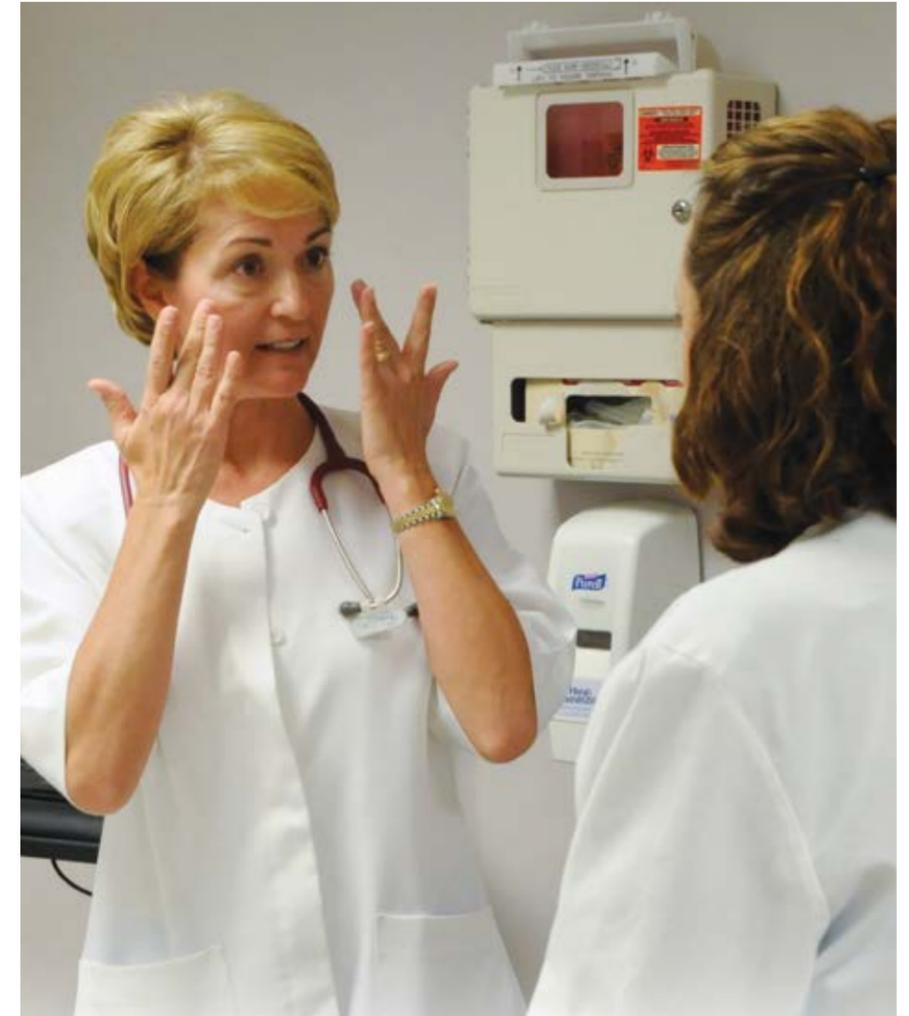
Her doctors wasted no time in moving forward with treatment—she underwent a bilateral mastectomy in November. “They wanted to get in and take care of it immediately. It turns out I actually had aggressive stage 1 cancer—one 38mm tumor, and one 3mm tumor.”

Jessica started chemo two days after Christmas and finished up this April. Looking back at her experience now, she says the whole thing feels like a whirlwind. “When I was going through it, it felt long, but now I can’t believe it’s over! I’m very, very blessed.”

Through it all, she was amazed at the support she received from the people around her. “People that didn’t know me wrote me. My seven-year-old son shaved my head for me and told me when I was completely bald, ‘Mommy, you’re so beautiful!’ My boyfriend was there through all of it and took care of me.”

“Looking back, it’s been an empowering experience. If I can do all of this—take care

of my child and work and deal with this, I can do anything. It’s made me stronger. It’s made me a better person. I feel like I can empathize with people and be there for them.”



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