



Breast Cancer Awareness

Survivor Stories

Regular Screenings
SAVES LIVES



Survivor Sisters

The Survivor Sisters from left to right Jennifer Bremser, Carrie Arquette, Angelia Abbott, Danielle Volks, at the 2016 Silver Bay weekend. The women became friends as a result of their shared experiences battling cancer.

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 SURVIVOR STORY

KAREN RAGER

Regular Screenings Saves Lives

BY MELISSA GUAY

Breast cancer survivor Karen Rager considers herself one of the lucky ones, and she has routine screenings to thank for it.

“It really could have been so much worse. The lump was in a place I never would have found on my own,” she said.

Rager has a strong family history of breast cancer, so routine screenings were always part of her medical care.

“I’d been getting mammograms for as long as I can remember. I had one in June of 2016 when they found some suspicious cells on my right side. They told me to come back in October for a recheck,” she said.

Rager said by sheer accident of circumstances, she ended up putting off the October recheck until December. Once the recheck occurred, Rager knew something was different.

“Of course it was the one time I missed the recheck appointment. They called me and said they needed to get me back in right away for a biopsy. That was in January of 2017,” she said.

The spot that needed to be biopsied was a lump located against the chest wall. It tested positive for Invasive Ductal Carcinoma.

“There was no lump I could feel. It was too deep. I would have never found the cancer on my own. Routine screening saved my life,” Rager said.

The lumpectomy and partial mastectomy yielded about a 1-inch cancerous mass.

“They also removed one lymph node and found very few cells of concern. It may sound odd, but if you’re going to have cancer this was the one to have,” Rager said.

Rager paused further treatment while she awaited results for BRCA1 and BRCA2 genetic testing, to see if she had a genetic predisposition for cancer.

“I tested negative, but my treatment



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Karen Rager

would have been different if those results were different. That was one of the hardest parts—the waiting. I wanted to get it all over and done with,” she said.

Rager began treatment at the C.R. Wood Cancer Center at Glens Falls Hospital. She underwent radiation five days a week from March 15 through the end of April.

“They’re amazing at the cancer center. They are so supportive. It is a great place with awesome people.”

“I couldn’t help but feel lucky every time I went. So many people were there fighting a harder battle than mine,” she said.

Rager said about half way through



radiation fatigue became a difficult side effect.

“When it ended, I felt like I’d been run over by a car,” she said.

Rager also experienced skin issues like raw skin, sun burnt sensations and residual hardening from the radiation.

“Overall, I am very lucky. My side effects were minimal and my treatment was effective,” she said.

Rager said she had a great support staff throughout the ordeal.

“My husband brought me to almost every appointment. I had a true partner throughout the entire time. My kids are older and live further away, but they were also very supportive,” she said.

Rager was given a clean bill of health

in May 2017. She continues to receive routine care every six months to monitor any chance of reoccurrence.

“I think about it all of the time. It’s always going to be in the back of my mind; you can’t help but worry it’ll come back,” she said.

She presently teaches private piano lessons, and works with her husband, Scott, and as well as for several non-profit organizations, doing graphic design.

“Having cancer taught me to make sure I campaign for regular screenings for everyone I can. I might not be here without them. It also taught me we’re all here day to day. That different perspective makes me enjoy life more. It’s a gift,” Rager said.



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Tuesday, October 1 -
Thursday, October 31, 2019

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Sunday, October 20, 2019 - 10:00 a.m.
Check in (Walk: 12pm)

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makingstrides.acsevents.org

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[tolife.org/donating-and-fundraising-events/
fundraising-events/pink-ball](http://tolife.org/donating-and-fundraising-events/fundraising-events/pink-ball)

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Sunday, October 27, 2019 -
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 SURVIVOR STORY

SURVIVOR SISTERS

The Survivor Sisters from left to right Jennifer Bremser, Carrie Arquette, Angelia Abbott, Danielle Volks, at the 2016 Silver Bay weekend. The women became friends as a result of their shared experiences battling cancer.



BY MELISSA GUAY

Laughter flows easily between the four ladies, as they sit circled around a table late one early October evening. Easy side conversations, and casual interjections between them exude the warm familiarity only a deep friendship can.

"I call them my survivor sisters," said Hartford resident Angelia Abbott. "We are part of a club we don't ever want anyone to have to join, but I don't know what I'd have done without them."

Abbott, along with friends Carrie Arquette from Whitehall, Danielle Volks from Queensbury, and Jennifer Bremser from Queensbury are all survivors of breast cancer. As one sits and talks with these young, smiling and vibrant women, it's hard to believe each has beat cancer on her own terms – and well before the age of 40. Their bond is one born of shared experience.

"I really felt alone in it at first," said Bremser, of her battle with breast cancer. "I went to the support groups but felt like I couldn't relate. I was younger, with young kids. These women here gave me that support. I knew they understood. We were all at about the same age and stage in our lives," she said.

"Things like mom guilt during treatment," chimed in Arquette. "You would want to get up and be there for your kids the whole time, but just be wiped. I could share that here in this group. No one would tell me not to feel that way or I was wrong; they'd just listen and understand."

Several of the women nod in agreement.

"There were things you didn't even want to share with your husband. Girl things – or because you knew he was already worried enough. We provided that for each other, and still do," Abbott said.

The Survivor Sisters Begin

The Survivor Sisters genesis began when a newly diagnosed Abbott decided to write a blog for The Post-Star in 2011, describing the intimate details of her battle with cancer.

"I read the blog and it was like reliving my battle. I had cancer the year before Angelia, so I reached out to her through her contact information at The Post-Star. I wanted to offer her support," Arquette said.

Arquette's own battle began in 2010 when she noticed a lump in her breast while she was in the



Proof that there is life after cancer, the Survivor Sisters' children at the 2017 Silver Bay weekend. (Standing left to right- Nicholas Abbott, Seth Arquette, William Volks and Miles Bremser. Sitting left to right: Hope Abbott, Julia Arquette and Annabelle Bremser).

shower.

"I was 31 at the time, with a one year old and a four year old. I thought it couldn't be possible," she said.

She had a mammogram, then an ultrasound, and a biopsy. She was diagnosed with Stage I Invasive Ductal Carcinoma.

"It all went so fast. Before I knew it I had a lumpectomy, and was undergoing chemotherapy and radiation," she said.

Arquette completed her treatment in December, and reached out to Abbott that spring.

Abbott's blog also connected her with Volks, who reached out for the same purpose, to offer support, several years after her own battle with cancer.

"I was diagnosed in 2008. I was 28 at the time," Volks said.

Volks found a lump in her breast while doing a self-exam. Shortly after, she discovered an enlarged lymph node in her armpit.

"I knew something was wrong right away. My dad had just had cancer so it was at the forefront of my mind," she said.

A mammogram and biopsy confirmed her suspicions; she had cancer.

"It was difficult because my husband and I were at the point where we wanted to start a family. It all had to be put on hold. We couldn't be sure it would ever get to happen, though I always knew in my heart it would," she said.

Volks underwent a lumpectomy and

auxiliary lymph node dissection, where 16 lymph nodes were removed. She also endured chemotherapy and radiation.

"The whole time I just kept thinking about my son. I wanted a son. It had to be a boy so he would never have to go through what I was going through. The thought of him kept me going," she said.

Volks finished treatment, and is now 11 years cancer free. Her son, William, is seven years old. Volks said when she read about Abbott's battle she had to reach out.

"She wrote in her blog about having to put her life on hold, and wanting more children down the road, and I could so relate to that. I wanted to tell her there was hope," Volks said.

Abbott, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2011, had an infant at the time but always knew she wanted more children.

"A large family was always in my plan. Getting cancer was never part of that plan," Abbott said.

"Angelia loves to plan," added Arquette, laughing.

Angelia was diagnosed with Triple Negative Invasive Ductal Carcinoma, the same rare, aggressive cancer as Volks, just four months after her son was born.

"I thought it was a clogged milk duct at first. After a couple of weeks it was still there. I got an ultrasound and then

Please see **SISTERS**, Page 6

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The Survivor Sisters and their families at the 2017 Silver Bay weekend. This was the last year that Silver Bay allowed repeat visitors to the Breast Cancer program, so it's the last year their annual tradition was able to occur. The women have a combined 33 years post cancer. (Adults in back row; left to right: Stephen Abbott, Angelia Abbott, Danielle Volks, Peter Volks, Carrie Arquette, Jerry Arquette, Jen Bremser, Ryan Bremser. Kids in front; left to right: William Volks, Nicholas Abbott, Julia Arquette, Hope Abbott, Annabelle Bremser, Seth Arquette, and Miles Bremser)

Sisters

From Page 5

decided to get a biopsy," she said.

In March 2011, she was diagnosed with cancer.

"It felt like I was out of my body at first. It was surreal," she said.

She began her treatments, and her blog, which brought the first members of the Survivor Sisters together.

"I think it was around May (2012) that Carrie, Danielle, and I began to meet regularly. We'd do dinners once a month, and bounce doctor's advice off of each other. They were at the end of their battles, and I was in the middle of it," Abbott said.

"It's one of those things you don't understand unless you've been through it. You don't even know the right questions to ask at first," Bremser added. "Having people to help you navigate that is so important."

Abbott's chemotherapy ended in July, and radiation treatments in September. All were successful. Her daughter, Hope, entered the scene not long after.

It was during a routine follow-up at The Breast Center in Glens Falls Hospital in 2014 that Abbott met Bremser. Bremser had noticed a lump in her breast, and after getting an ultrasound, went to the center for a mammogram.

"They told me I could wait and just keep an eye on the cyst, but I pushed for a mammogram. I didn't want to wait," Bremser said.

It was in the waiting room that she met Abbott.

"I'm extraverted so I just made a joke about it being awkward to be there waiting with her. She laughed, and wished me luck and we parted ways. It wasn't until about ten months later that we met again and became friends," she said.

Bremser said she went back and got a biopsy the same day as her mammogram. The diagnosis was Invasive Ductal Carcinoma. She opted for a treatment at Dana Farber as part of an experimental study called the ATTEMP trial.

"The trial was for a Tdm1 drug. The drug was targeted, so it opened channels that went right to the cancer instead of through my whole body. It's a randomized trial, and I was lucky enough to be selected," she said.

During her treatment, Bremser decided to go to a retreat offered by the C.R.Wood Cancer Center for breast cancer patients, survivors and their families.

It was there she met Abbott again.

"I remembered her right away," Abbott said. "And then I was like, I'm so sorry your tests didn't go well. It sucks you're here," Abbott said.

"Jen quickly fit right in with rest of us. She was the next member in the club," she said.

All four women went with their families to the Silver Bay retreat for several years running, until it was closed to repeat guests. The women continued to meet regularly to talk, laugh, compare notes, and just be with other women who understood.

"They became my support group," Bremser said. "I could compare treatments, get advice on how to manage radiation. It made all the things I was going through feel more normal," she said.

Still Surviving.

Today the women share a combined 33 years of being cancer free, and even more years of combined friendship. Each still sees a doctor every six months, either for a mammogram or an MRI. Many even see the same doctor.

"I call it scan-xiety," Abbott said about the regular screenings. "I get anxious every time."

"They only want to see you every six months, unless they see something suspicious—but they always see something suspicious," added Bremser.

Several of the women laugh and nod in agreement. They know what it's like.

"I still have an 18-percent chance (cancer) might come back. It'll always be there, but you can't let it run your life...There was never a moment where I thought I wasn't going to beat it. I still feel that way," Arquette said.

The women are each success stories in their own right. Abbott owns her own marketing business, and is mother to two children. Arquette is a teacher in Granville, serves on the Whitehall Board of Education, and is also mother to two children. Volks has her son, her miracle baby, and is presently teaching preschool and serving on two boards at Glens Falls Hospital. Bremser is a professor for SUNY Plattsburgh, and mother of two as well.

Each hopes women going through what they did will find comfort and support through their survival stories. They want everyone to know it can be beat.

"It's doable. Fighting cancer is tough and it's hard, but it's doable," said Volks.

"And it's going to be okay," Bremser added.

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Questions to ask after you've been diagnosed

GREEN SHOOT MEDIA

A breast cancer diagnosis is scary, and often patients don't know what to ask when their doctor tells them what's happening.

Although you have a cancer treatment team and you'll have opportunities to ask questions at subsequent appointments, it can be helpful to have an idea of what you need to know as you go to follow-up appointments and meet other care providers.

Don't be afraid to ask your doctor about their experience treating this type, getting a second opinion and any detail you don't understand. This can help you not only get the information you need but also take some measure of control over your life during a difficult time. The American Cancer Society has lists of questions to help you.



When you're diagnosed

- How big is the cancer?
- Where exactly is the tumor?
- Has it spread to lymph nodes or other organs?
- What stage is it? What does that mean?
- Who else will be on my treatment team?
- How much will this cost? What does my insurance cover? Is there a patient advocate who can help me through the financial side of this?

Surgery

- What type of surgery is best for me?
- Should I consider a full mastectomy, even though the cancer hasn't spread?
- How long will recovery take? How much of that will be in the hospital versus at home?
- What will happen during recovery? Will I have stitches or staples? Will there be a drain coming out of the site?
- What are my options for breast reconstruction? What are the risks?

Before and during treatment

- What are my options for treatment? What are the positives and negatives of each?
- How long should I expect treatment to last?
- What side effects will I experience?
- What treatment do you recommend/ what regimen would you do if you were diagnosed with this type of cancer?
- Are clinical trials an option? Should I consider those?
- Will I lose my hair? How will treatment affect my daily life?
- What happens if this treatment doesn't work?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- What lifestyle changes should I make during treatment – a different diet or exercise regimen, for example?
- If I experience depression or anxiety, what resources are available?

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