

Brave Woman



Claudette Richards

“Each day is a gift, and I want to choose to not simply be alive, but to live. I want to continue being more mindful, more grateful, and more aware of the preciousness of life and my power to direct my destiny and live life to the fullest.”

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photo by Michael Cooney

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As for me, my breasts went from flat to a C-cup during the summer between fifth and sixth grade. Starting at a new school, I was the only girl in sixth grade that wore a bra. That certainly caused attention – especially from the boys.

Growing up in the sixties, I wanted to be like Twiggy. I never wanted to weigh over 100 pounds, but no matter how much I dieted to stay skinny I had this bothersome huge load on top that always seemed to be in my way. I was out of proportion so I usually wore separates rather than dresses that I would have to make over to fit properly. By the time I was a senior I was wearing triple-sized cups. It didn't matter that I was very shy or that I had a 4-point grade point average; I was constantly being kidded about being a “party girl” just because of the size of my breasts. I guess I had body acceptance in tolerating them, but I certainly didn't love them.

Over the years I periodically checked into having breast reduction, but due to other medical issues and potential surgical complications I chose to live with the pain and inconvenience rather than have such a drastic invasive procedure done. Besides as I grew older, they were losing some of their fullness and getting a little smaller.

In the early nineties I was diagnosed with a different type of cancer. At that time I would say I believe I was living more intentionally and mindfully than many people in society (who seemed to be going through the motions of their daily lives on auto-pilot), but it took having cancer to tweak my awareness of what being alive and living really meant to me. Fortunately, the cancer was caught early and treated successfully.

Three years ago as Jim and I were about to go on the “Fire and Ice” nude cruise to Alaska, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Immediately I was “re-awakened” from what had become somewhat a routine day-to-day life into the reality of the moment.

I first had a lumpectomy and treatment at the University of Wisconsin, but a number of mistakes led me to researching and choosing to go to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. There I had a bi-lateral mastectomy, and despite my other major medical issues the surgery went very well. I shed 11 pounds of breasts in the operating room, (although it's probably not the

best way to lose weight.)

We then went to Avalon for the music festival—what a great way to recover! Although my scarred bruised chest may not have been the prettiest site, it represented to me what I had overcome. I felt alive and empowered, and because I did not try to hide my chest it created an opportunity for many incredible conversations with people. However, to my surprise I did find that when I wore pareos to shield from the sun I had to tie them around my neck in various ways so they wouldn't fall down to my waist (something I never had a problem with before)!

Since my breasts had previously given me some emotional and much physical pain (backaches, neck aches, headaches) I did not experience any major level of trauma regarding the mastectomy decision—they were trying to kill me, so getting rid of them was a no-brainer to me. My breasts did not define who I was as a woman or a person.

What was more difficult for me was the issue of reconstruction. I never thought I would even remotely consider having some “foobs” (fake boobs). Then doctors started telling me that because of the weight of my breasts and the number of years I had been carrying them I could very well continue to experience similar back problems due to the torso muscles being used to that weight and it no longer being there. After some research I decided that I wanted to do everything possible to lessen my chances of having backaches.

I did not want anything that wasn't “me” in my body, so my first choice for replacement would have been to have a DIEP or TRAM procedure done where they take part of my tummy and move it up to my chest. I could live with that, as it was just repositioning my own parts. However, I was soon told that I would not be a candidate for the very long surgery due to other major health issues I have.

With that no longer being an option, the difficult decision was to use implants. Fortunately my surgeon said I could choose how small I wanted to be. I've had these weird “spacers” in since last fall, my backaches are pretty much stabilized, and some time this fall I will go to Miami (where my surgeon moved) and have them exchanged for implants. I have been fortunate in that sensation has returned almost entirely to my chest, so the area feels much more “natural” and a part of me than I thought it would.

As for nipples, I rather like not having them. They don't do anything, I like being different, and appreciate that blank canvas look. Since I had so much skin to work with I don't have much in the way of scars, so I find being nippleless is empowering and a good reminder of the challenge I faced and what I have survived. I can always change my mind in the future.

Cancer is not something that I would have chosen to have, but I am very grateful that I've had it and so far survived it. I want the benefits I gain from having cancer to far outweigh the negatives. Each day is a gift, and I choose to not simply be alive, but to live. I want to continue being more mindful, more grateful, and more aware of the preciousness of life and my power to direct my destiny and live life to the fullest.

I have been VERY fortunate to have Jim by my side supporting me and helping me every step of the way. He is my solid rock especially during the tough times, and celebrates with me during the good. In addition, the vast majority of support I have received has been from naturists, and I am grateful for all within my naturist circle of friends who have been there for me in so very many ways.

I have a quote from Vivian Greene hanging on my wall that has inspired me through it all—“Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass... It's about learning to dance in the rain!” **N**

A SIG has been formed, Naturist Breast Cancer Survivors, NBCS whose purpose is to provide a safe and understanding place to come together and share knowledge and support.

The opportunity to unite and meet new friends through this SIG can continue to help naturists dealing with issues of body acceptance, treatment options, and living life to the fullest. Beyond some basic purposes already mentioned, one of NBCS goals is for it to be living and flexible in its direction, based on the desires of its members.

A website is being planned but for now feel free to E-mail naturistbreastcancersurvivors@yahoo.com for more info.

There is still a lot of work to be done. We don't know what the cause of breast cancer is nor do we know how to prevent it. Women are still dying.

- Every three minutes a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer.
- Breast Cancer will occur in about 13% of women in the United States - that's one in eight.
- For women in the United States, the breast cancer death rate is higher than any other form of cancer, except lung cancer.
- As of 2008, there were about 2.5 women in the United States who are breast cancer survivors.
- Less than 1% of all new breast cancer cases occur in men.

“ We create activists
—one person, one community,
one state, one nation at a time—to try and solve the
number one health concern
of women. ”

— Nancy Brinker,
Susan G. Komen's sister