Article Series Inspirational Stories Breast

Cynthia’s story: Finding her voice

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[Cynthia] I lived more in the last few years since my diagnosis than I've lived in the 30-something years prior to that.

[soft music]

Welcome to my home.

Prior to my diagnosis, I thought I was going through one of these things called creative block.

In my heart, I'd have songs. In my pens and journals, I'd write lyrics and all kinds of stuff, but I was never putting it out into the world and sharing it.

Creativity is like breathing. It's life, it's everything. I can't keep it inside.

It's like turmoil for me, proven turmoil.

I went to the doctor. I said, you've gotta check me out, something's wrong.

It took several years to finally get a diagnosis of breast cancer.

When you're a young woman and you shed something like breasts, you learn to shed a lot of things: unnecessary people, stress, unnecessary bills.

You know, you start to get rid of these things.

I really prided myself in being busy all the time and making very good money, and I thought that's what life was about.

I would never go back to that. I would never go back to that life.

Okay, so I wanna hear you perform. You're gonna perform a song for us right now live?

[Performer] Yes, I am, from the "Enjoy Life" album.

[Cynthia] "Enjoy Life" album-this song is called?

[Performer] This song is called-

[Cynthia] I made sure that I didn't repeat a behavioral pattern that I knew I had before diagnosis, which was when I was experiencing a challenge, I buried it.

I made sure I'd have, like, the best face on.

One of the most incredible gifts of going through cancer is teaching me how to be here right now.

And that's what's changed. I don't think of how things could be better all the time.

That's how I used to be. What drives me is, be here right now.

Thank you. Oh, that was just as good as the last one.

I try to tell people who are newly diagnosed to think of this as a restart and not like a death sentence.

You can reinvent your life. You have all the permission now.

When I'm DJing and people start going wild, if they were having a bad day-not anymore.

And I helped them get there. And that makes me so happy to survive all this stuff.

And to know that I am DJing because I went through cancer and now I'm helping, literally, 60, 100 people in front of me.

I mean, that's just the best way to metabolize cancer.

[piano music]

All of us, every single one of us, our candle is eventually gonna run out.

But, in my opinion, there's only one way to live. Live fully.

Experience everything you can.

Forgive. Trust. Heal. It's a constant healing.

Why does it take cancer to do that, I don't know. But I wanna tell people, be creative.

Help other people express themselves, and even when your candle is out, your light will shine on.

[soft music]

I figured it out. I think I figured out that song.

CYNTHIA M.
LIVING WITH CANCER SINCE 2015

With her creative spirit and warm smile, Cynthia is the kind of person who makes an impression the moment you meet her. Her spirit shines when she speaks about her music and other artistic projects, and she has a talent for making you feel like you're the only person in the room.

Creativity has always been central to Cynthia's life. As a multimedia designer, most of her work took place behind the scenes—and behind many computer screens in office cubicles. All of that changed with a diagnosis of stage II breast cancer.

> In my mind, I would have ideas. In my heart, I'd have songs. In my journals, I'd write lyrics and all kinds of stuff. But I was never putting it out into the world and sharing it.

After Cynthia had some vague symptoms for a few years in her 30s, a nurse detected a lump during a routine doctor's visit. Cynthia was diagnosed with an invasive form of breast cancer. Like most people, she went through myriad emotions after receiving the news. She was relieved to finally know what was wrong, and the

diagnosis also made sense given her family history of the disease.

But then there was the shock, the fear and, finally, the resolve.

> One thing that's really great about this experience of going through cancer treatment is understanding that I have a voice.

Article slides



Cynthia and her dog, Tonka.



Cynthia interviews fellow artist, Smax Music.



Cynthia shares a moment with a friend.



Cynthia walks along the waterfront in Brooklyn Bridge Park.



Cynthia DJs in Manhattan's East Village.



Cynthia works on a song in her home studio in New York City

For Cynthia, sharing her creativity with the world and connecting with others became integral to her healing. Her work became more visual, more vocal and more social. One of the first things she did after her diagnosis was design a T-shirt that read "Stronger Than Cancer." She wore it to arm herself for the journey into treatment.

Cynthia also started sharing her daily "cancer diaries" online with family, friends and strangers. Writing was an important exercise. Sharing her experiences allowed her to work through her emotions and receive love and support from people around her. Her new philosophy? To put her passions, joys, fears and art into the world, and transform the challenges of life into love, hope and gratitude.

> One of the most incredible gifts cancer has given me is knowing how to be here right now and to be grateful that I can be here right now.

Today, Cynthia channels her spirit of love and creativity into the world around her. She hosts a radio show and a podcast. She's a professional DJ who plays for different organizations around the city. She officiates weddings, and even finds time to mentor young women at a music camp for girls.

Her diagnosis inspired her to play, connect and create as much as possible. She sees it as her mission to pour her energy into the world and inspire hope in as many people as she can.

It's also taught her to live in the moment, a gift that she hopes others can learn from without going through an experience like cancer.

> I've lived more in the couple of years since my diagnosis than I lived in the 30-something years prior to that. I've gotten more hugs, more I love yous and more handshakes.

Cancer gave Cynthia the permission to be everything she wanted to be. And while her diagnosis helped her find her voice and jump-start her life, she admits that it's as much a struggle as it is a gift. She calls it "PTG," short for "post-traumatic growth."

Cynthia took the trauma of those fateful words from her doctor and used it as a catalyst to share her voice with the world around her. And because of this, she feels she's living her fullest life.

Even on the hard days, Cynthia says, life is full of joy and beauty, just waiting to be expressed.

> I tell people: Heal, forgive, love. Be creative. Express yourself. Help other people express themselves. And even when your candle is out, your light will shine on.