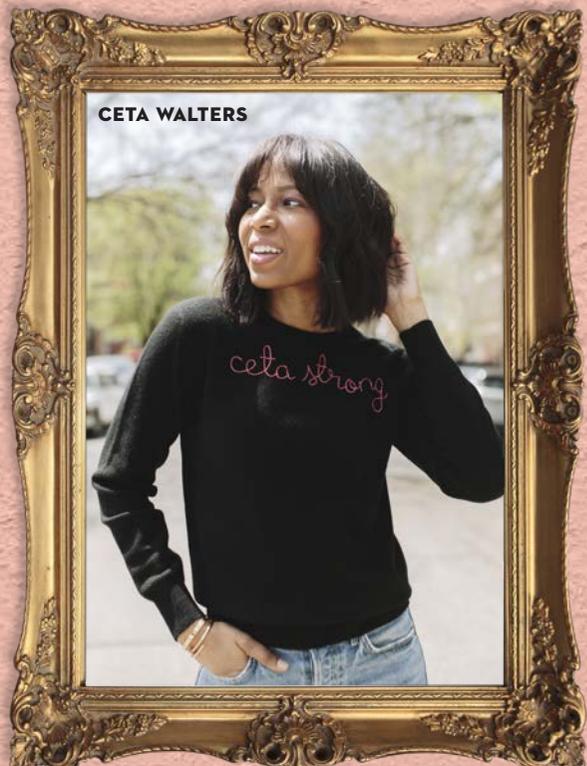
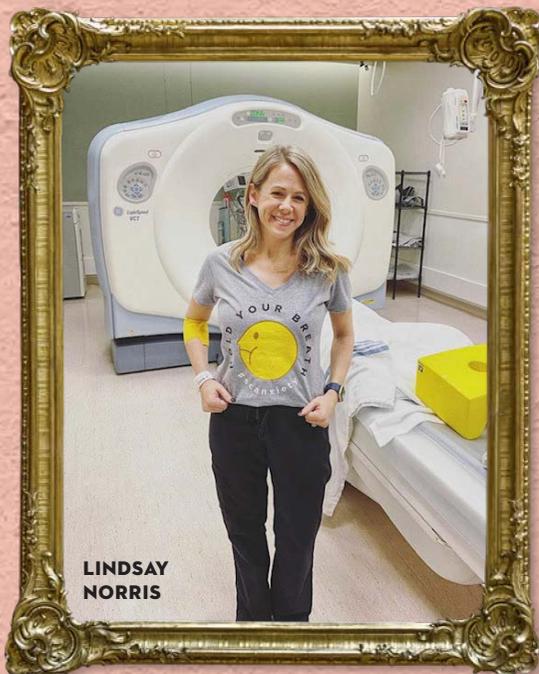


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“This Is My Life...with Cancer”



With early detection and new targeted treatments, survival rates for cancers have been rising steadily across the board over the past few decades. Here, three women discuss what they've learned and how they balance their hopes for the future with the reality of their disease.

by **LESLIE GOLDMAN**

“I Never Wanted to Be Treated with Kid Gloves”

In 2019, six months after **Ceta Walters**, a Chicago-based digital content creator, filed for “the Big D” (divorce), she was slammed with “the Big C” (cancer). After that came the pandemic (“the Big P”?). It was a lot. Still, other people’s reactions to her diagnosis of Stage III invasive ductal carcinoma in her right breast threw her: “It was all they wanted to talk about! They’d get what I call ‘cancer eyes’ and ask, ‘How are you?’ The last thing I wanted was to be treated with kid gloves.”

She plowed through. “I cried myself to sleep, thinking, *Who’s going to hold me and say it’s going to be OK?*” says Ceta, who has a fashion blog, *Clark and Stone*, named for her two sons, ages 8 and 9. “Then I’d wake up, cry in the shower, put on a brave face and wake my boys up for school.”

Hewing as close as she could to being her usual self

throughout chemo, radiation and a double mastectomy (she chose to have her left breast removed prophylactically) helped her deal with all that was happening: Ceta exercised, wore a chic wig when she lost her hair and used humor as a distraction. “My expanders—empty implants that my doctor slowly filled to stretch the skin before the real implants went in—were too far apart,” Ceta says. “I joked that my breasts were social distancing.”

Soon, though, Ceta realized she had inadvertently glamorized cancer. “My Instagram followers would say, ‘You look so good; you don’t look sick.’ But I *was* sick,” she says. “I had skin burns from my chemo. My hair had fallen out. I realized I needed to balance the pretty photos with acknowledging that cancer is hard.” In late 2020, she shared her first bald throwback picture, followed by a shot of herself with three months of hair regrowth in early 2021, both titled “Instagram vs. Reality.”

Now 48 and healed from her surgeries, Ceta enjoys

being real with other women about what cancer is really like. “I’m all about the silver linings: I didn’t have to deal with my period during chemo, and I’m grateful I had the chance to have my kids and nurse them,” she says. “I had breast cancer and I got through it. It’s kind of like going to college—you graduate, and if you find out someone went to your alma mater, you share memories with them, but you don’t think about it every day.”

Ceta was declared cancer-free in May 2020, and the cancer is unlikely to return given her double mastectomy. (A woman diagnosed with breast cancer in 2021 is 15% less likely to die from it than she would have been just a decade ago.) But life as a newly single breast cancer survivor is daunting. “I’ve got baggage!” Ceta says. “I used to have loads of self-confidence, and this has robbed me of some of it.” One step toward regaining her mojo: She recently underwent revision implant reconstruction, as she was unhappy with how her implants looked. “I felt like, after going through all of this, I should be able to have boobs I liked when I walked around naked—and I love my new ones!” Ceta says. “I have friends who are survivors who feel bad for complaining about things like that. I don’t.”

It’s all part of the new mentality that cancer has nudged her toward. “It’s OK to not be in love with the person you loved at 30. It’s OK to have breast cancer and then want a revision. Change is good.”

Ceta recently wrote in a (wig-free) Instagram post: *I’m a work in progress. I’m still under construction. But, then again, aren’t we all?* ★

MAGIC MOMENTS

“I tell people, ‘Take the trip. Eat the donut. Learn the TikTok dance,’” says Erika, with her family.



“I Say Yes More”

Erika Hlavacek’s Wilmette, IL, home is busy and loud with laughter. On any given day, the 46-year-old former pilot can be found helping her son with his homework, watching her daughter’s swim meet over Zoom or celebrating National Pound Cake Day. Her Stage IV lung cancer is also part of her life.

Erika was “blindsided” by her 2017 diagnosis—like the roughly 20% of newly diagnosed lung cancer patients who have never smoked, she simply had a pair of lungs as a risk factor. She’d been struggling with a cough and back pain for three months. When the pain grew so severe that she required hospitalization, tests and scans detected lung cancer.

Until recently, a Stage IV lung cancer diagnosis would have been perceived as a death sentence—only 5% of patients survive for five years. But thanks to treatment advances (the FDA has approved at least 20 new tests and drugs to better diagnose and treat lung cancer in just



MY NEW REALITY

“Breast cancer tried to take a lot of things from me, but I never gave up,” says Ceta. “I miss my long hair, but I’m still here living my life.”



This is not the life I had before cancer. I say yes more. I go outside my comfort zone. —Erika Hlavacek

the past two years), patients are living longer than ever before. Genetic testing revealed that Erika’s cancer had a mutation called ALK+. “That’s like winning the lottery in the lung cancer world, because there are lots of new options that can successfully treat it,” Erika says. She began using a newly approved therapy that targets cancer cells specific to the ALK+ mutation and prevents them from multiplying. She also underwent two radiation sessions.

While Erika seems to be beating the odds, numerous challenges remain. In 2019, she learned that her cancer had spread to her brain. Fortunately, a new targeted treatment had received FDA approval just months earlier, and within three weeks of her getting it, Erika’s brain was cleared of hundreds of lesions. She has multiple side effects from her medications and undergoes a brain MRI and body CT scan every two to three months. “I prepare myself in the days prior, so if I hear that the cancer has progressed, it won’t be so shocking, and I go to plan B.” Recent scans have shown that her disease is stable, meaning the cancer isn’t improving but isn’t getting worse.

Cancer has sparked a change in Erika’s outlook: “Pre-diagnosis, I was the queen of ‘I’ll do it tomorrow.’ I would say, ‘We’ll go strawberry-picking next summer’ or ‘We’ll take that vacation next year.’ But

now I’ve dedicated myself to doing all the things I might have put off before.” To that end, with her husband, Jeff, and their kids, now 12 and 13, Erika created a travel bucket list. Last year they took a 22-day cross-country trip, visiting nine national parks along the way. A few months ago, they soaked up the Hawaiian sun. Erika also put a clock with no hands on the fireplace mantel as a reminder to live in the moment.

While there is no cure for Stage IV lung cancer, “I’m very hopeful that this could be a manageable chronic disease one day and not a terminal illness,” Erika says. She is an outspoken lung cancer advocate, lobbying Congress to boost funding for more breakthrough treatments. “This is not the life I had prior to my diagnosis, but I’m alive,” she says. “Focusing on what I can control allows me to be able to breathe through the rest.”★

“I Have Anxiety – But It Can Motivate Me”

At the hospital where Lindsay Norris was treated for Stage III colorectal cancer, patients are invited to ring a ceremonial bell after finishing chemo. But when Lindsay’s turn came, she hesitated. “I was thinking of the other patients who would never stop treatment, and I was worried about



LIGHT OF MY LIFE

Lindsay, with children Evelyn and Harrison, recently got a sun tattoo in honor of the song “Here Comes the Sun,” which played during an MRI she had.

jinxing myself,” she says. With her now 8-year-old son’s help, though, Lindsay — an oncology nurse — rang the bell.

Lindsay had to have the lower section of her intestine removed, along with her rectum and anus, so she lives with daily reminders of her illness (including a pouch attached to a surgical opening in her abdomen that collects stool). “We joke that I have a Barbie butt, because everything is closed up down there,” she says.

But the psychological transition back to “regular” life was even more challenging: “In treatment, you felt like you were actively doing something, and now you just feel like you’re waiting with your fingers crossed.”

Lindsay was initially given a 70% chance of living five years based on her specific type and stage of cancer — a 10% improvement from 1980s statistics — and after five years with no recurrence, she will be considered “cured.” Now 37, Lindsay has been cancer-free for four years, but because her type of cancer has a high recurrence rate, she goes for a follow-up CT

scan every December. “When my son says, ‘Momma, can we go to Disney World when I’m 10?’ I feel hopeful, but also worried I won’t be here to do it. That little voice is always there: *I hope I don’t get a recurrence right before and ruin all the plans.*”

Lindsay says she’s learned that not all anxiety is bad; in the right doses, it can be motivating. “It reminds me to eat healthy and exercise. It gives me a little push not to live life on the sidelines.”

After her initial diagnosis, Lindsay wrote a letter on her blog titled “Dear Every Cancer Patient I Ever Took Care Of, I’m Sorry. I Didn’t Get It.” It went viral. Walking in her patients’ shoes opened her eyes to their daily issues, from struggling to accept help to feeling weird when people called them brave, and she believes it’s made her a more empathetic nurse. She still thinks about cancer every day, she says, “but it doesn’t cause me as much pain as it did before. I still carry it around, but it’s almost like I have a stroller now and can push it where I need to go instead of it weighing so heavily on my shoulders.”★