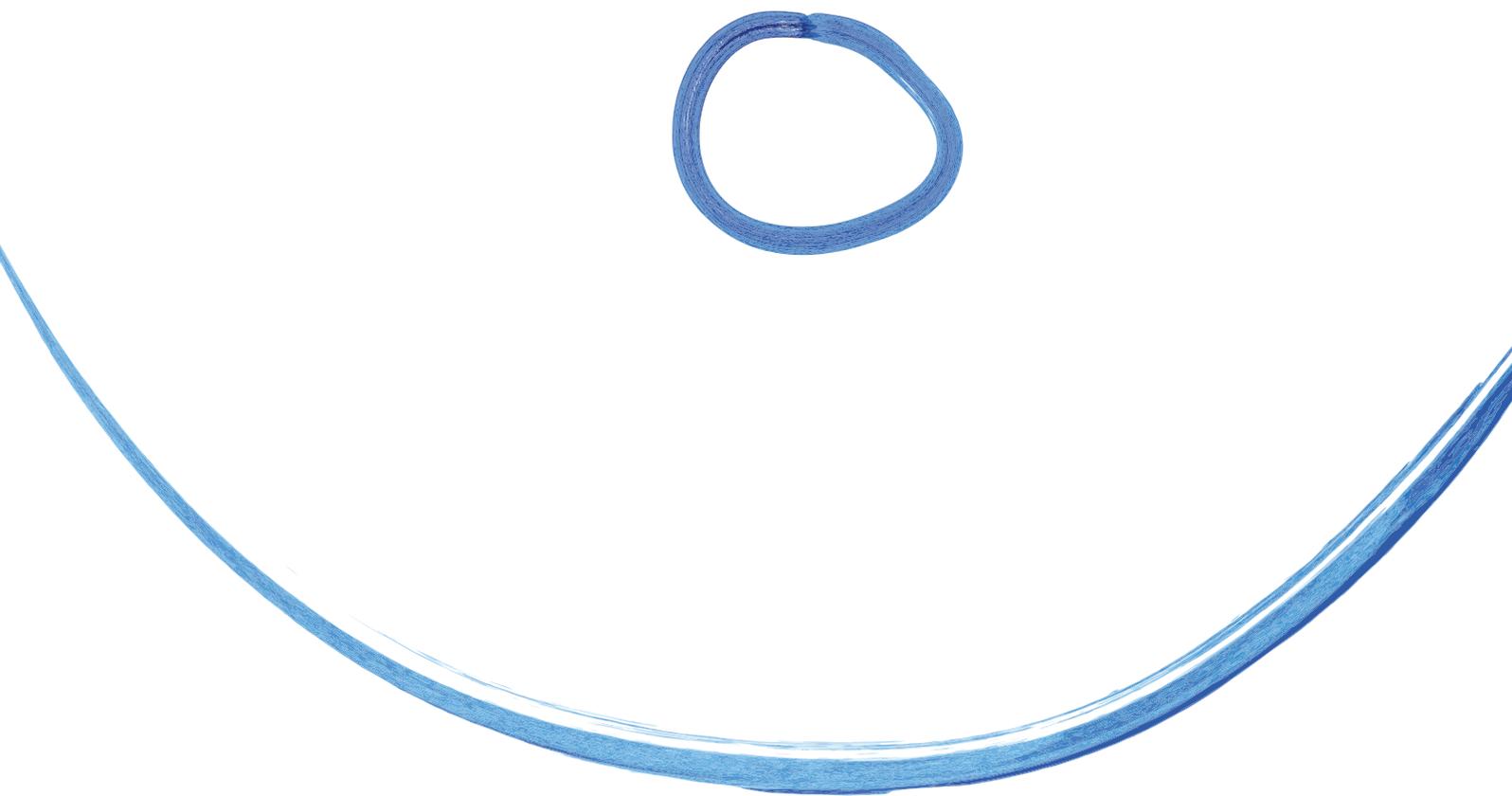


Through My Eyes

A collection of stories for women living with Metastatic Breast Cancer and their families





Introduction

Welcome to **Through My Eyes**, a collection of stories of women from across the Asia Pacific region (APAC) who are living with metastatic breast cancer (mBC) which is also known as advanced breast cancer.

Breast cancer is the most frequent cancer among women globally¹, and mBC is the most advanced stage of the disease. There is no cure², although treatments are available that help shrink tumours or slow the disease's progression³.

While early breast cancer has benefited significantly from advances in care over the past decade, there remains considerable room for improving care and support to mBC patients, their families and caregivers as they face this distressing disease.

In general, we are observing a rise in the cases of mBC diagnosed in the region⁴ and there remains a significant lack of awareness about this disease.

A recent Pfizer survey revealed that although 99% of respondents across five APAC countries had heard of breast cancer, 24% had not heard of mBC. Lack of awareness has serious consequences. A diagnosis of mBC carries a high emotional toll, and patients can feel isolated and forgotten in the breast cancer conversation.⁵

By shining a light on the lives of women living with mBC, family members, breast cancer advocates, healthcare professionals and caregivers, and hearing about their journey, we aim to share their story told through their eyes - their unique perspectives and goals.

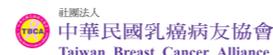
Through My Eyes hopes to improve public awareness of mBC, correct misperceptions, combat stigma and expand the breast cancer conversation to be more inclusive of this type of breast cancer.

Pfizer would like to acknowledge the significant support this initiative has received from Foundations/Charitable organisations including the McGrath Foundation, Breast Cancer Network Australia, Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation, Taiwan Breast Cancer Association, Associação de Feliz Paraíso in Macau and the Pink Ribbon Wellness Foundation in Malaysia. We would also like to thank the 18 inspirational participants who shared their stories with us, as well as healthcare professionals medical oncologist Professor Huang Chiun-Sheng and Nurse Kerry Ernst.

About Metastatic Breast Cancer (mBC)

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer in the world and the most frequent cancer among women.¹ mBC, also known as advanced breast cancer, is the most advanced stage of breast cancer for which there is currently no cure.² mBC occurs when breast cancer spreads beyond the breast to other parts of the body, commonly the bones, lungs, liver and brain.² Public health experts estimate there will be a 43% increase in breast cancer-related deaths globally between 2015 and 2030, most of which are expected to result from mBC.^{6,7} A similar trend is anticipated in the Asia Pacific region,^{6,8} which accounted for 24% of global female breast cancer cases in 2012.⁸

Thank you to the following Foundations/Charitable Organisations for their support



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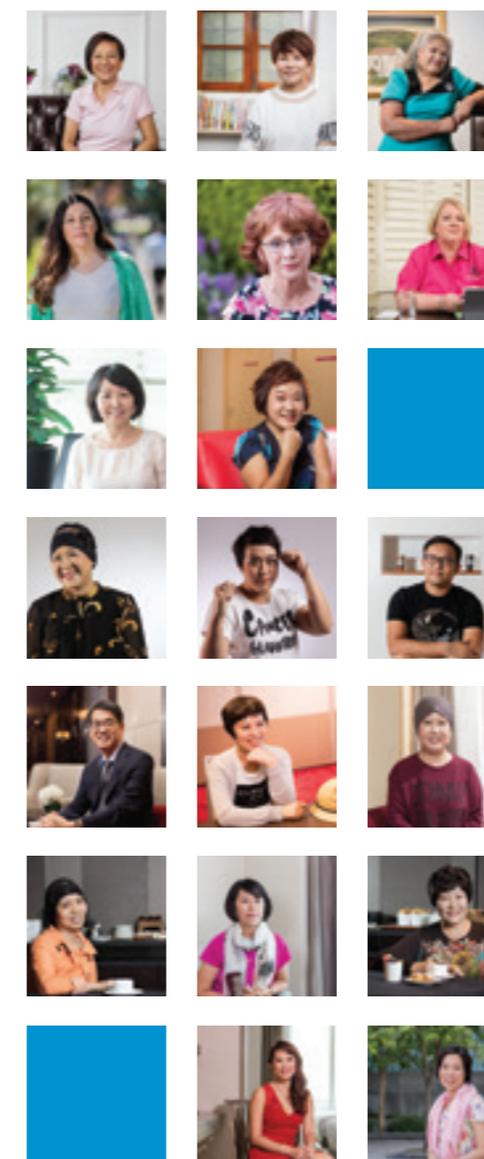
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Brenda and Andrew Konecnik

Brenda is 54, a primary school teacher and has been married to Andrew for over 27 years. They have three children, two of whom are still at home. They live in New South Wales in Australia. She was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer in 2015.





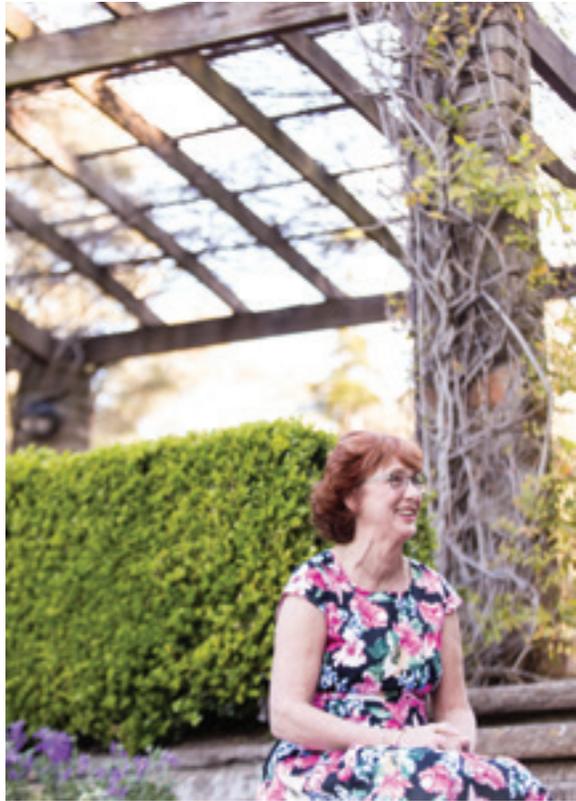
Watch Brenda and Andrew's video

“I am taking control of the rest of my life, no matter how long or short it is.”

In Australia you start having routine mammograms at 50. I had my second when I was 52 and it showed some abnormalities. After more tests I was told it was cancer and that there might be some complications and the doctor would ring to let me know. I asked him to ring my husband Andrew as I didn't want that phone call. The doctor rang him and said the cancer had spread to my liver. I remember seeing Andrew's car driving up the driveway and I was on the phone, but when I saw his face I knew. That's when it hit me and the rug was pulled out from underneath me. I thought it was a death sentence.

I had chemotherapy for six months which reduced the size of my cancer and then when it had reduced enough, I went on a hormonal tablet which stops my hormones from feeding the cancer cells. Every morning I take this pill and I think of a little Pac-Man going through my body and eating all the cancer cells which is something that keeps me going! And now I know there is always hope. This is not the end of the world. I don't call it a terminal illness, I call it a chronic illness, like asthma or depression.





“I’m leading a really good life.”

I’m leading a really good life and I’m happy with the way things are going. Before my diagnosis, I was worried about what people would say. I suffered from depression – I had it controlled but I would worry a lot about little things. I was a completely different person. Now I am going to do what I want to do. People would say to me, you need to be kind to yourself and I’ve taken that to a whole new level! Of course my children and my husband are my first loves and my first

responsibility, but if I want to buy a car... well, I did that last week! If I want to visit someone, I do it. If I want some time off, I take it. Before I’d think that the kids needed me for something and I wouldn’t do it, but our kids are old enough to look after themselves and that’s a huge weight off my shoulders.

Now I am very spontaneous. I’ve thought a lot about what cancer has given me. Cancer has completely turned my life around. If I say I’m happier – I don’t know, is that a bad thing? I feel as if I am taking control of the rest of my life, no matter how long or short it is. I am doing what I want to do.

Now I think I appreciate Andrew more. We have a very happy, loving relationship and the strength has always been there, but now we are not frightened of showing our love. And what gets us through is making plans – short term plans like going for a walk, seeing a comedian (you need to laugh at least 10 times a day) and long term goals where we make memories. We plan on going on a cruise and having a family reunion next year.

My favourite saying is that life is not about waiting for the storm to pass, it’s about learning to dance in the rain. Before, I would be the person who’d wait for the storm to finish. My favourite song in the world is Fight Song by Rachel Platten. The lyrics go: “This is my fight song. Take-back-my-life song. Prove-I’m-alright song. I don’t really care if no one else believes because I’ve got a lot of life left in me.” Strong words and something I truly believe.



The Husband’s View

Andrew said, “She was a lot quieter and more reserved before the diagnosis. Now she’s more outgoing and opened up herself to new experiences. She’s chasing her dreams and goals, and as our kids are older, she has had the freedom to do that.

I just want her to live forever. And I’m very positive – I believe the mind is very powerful and I think that the treatments that she is getting are keeping the cancer at bay. I keep on saying to her that she is going to outlive me, which I honestly believe. I believe she’s going to live a very long time.”

Catherine Polsen

Catherine is 36 and lives in Canberra, Australia. She has three boys, and she works part time in a bakery. She was diagnosed in 2015 with metastatic breast cancer which has spread to her sternum, spine and hips.





Watch Catherine's
video

“If women find the smallest little lump, they should get it checked.”

I have an aunty and a family friend with cancer and a month before my diagnosis, my uncle passed away from the same disease. Last year I was in the shower and I felt a little lump in my breast which was sore. I'd had pimples bigger than this lump, but I called the doctor and got an appointment. I was very stressed as I had a feeling that it would be cancer because it's in my family.

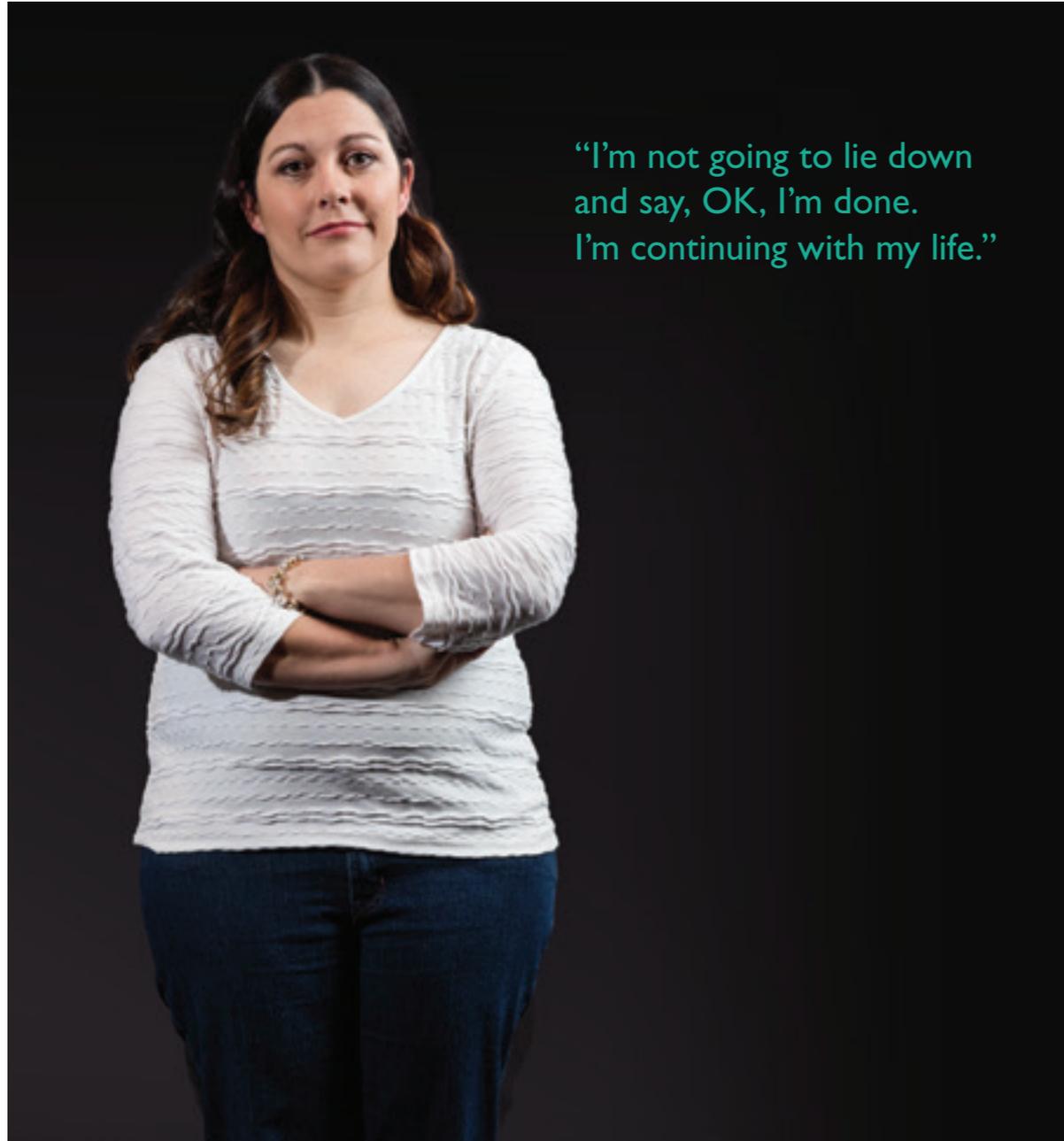
At first the doctor thought it was a cyst and she said to come back in two months if the lump was still there. It was, so I went back and had an ultrasound and then a mammogram and biopsy which came back as breast cancer. When I went back for a second biopsy a few days later I asked them to check my sternum as it had been sore

for a couple of months, and that's when they found that the cancer was there too. A full body scan showed that it was also in my spine.

The most difficult thing I have had to do is tell my children – that was harder than my diagnosis or any treatment. I've never lied to my children or hidden anything from them so I explained to them through a lot of tears what I knew at the time, that I didn't know what we were up against, but that I would keep them informed every step of the way.

Before I started treatment I thought that my time was up, that I wouldn't make it to the end of the year.





“I’m not going to lie down and say, OK, I’m done. I’m continuing with my life.”



The hormonal therapy has given me a lot of hope. This was working fine until a couple of weeks ago and I've had to change medications as it had stopped working and the cancer has now spread to my hips. I am hoping that the new type of treatment I'm having will get it under control.

The most helpful thing that my friends and family have done for me is that they don't look at me any differently. When other people find out, they say 'oh, I'm so sorry' but there's nothing they can do. The best thing that people can do is to let me be me and let me continue as normal. I'm not going to lie down and say, OK, I'm done. I'm continuing with my life. I have to show my children that I am strong and we are fine and we will be OK until we have no other choice.

Since my diagnosis my life has changed dramatically. I used to stress about everything and now I think a lot of things aren't worth getting upset about. If the house is dirty, I'll get to it eventually rather than feeling I have to clean it. I'm a lot more relaxed and spend a lot more

time with my family. I don't worry about small things any more.

The main thing I would tell women who have just been diagnosed is to talk about it. In Australia we have fantastic access to McGrath Foundation nurses, social groups and social workers. Sometimes you need to break down and be honest and open about your feelings and get it out of your system. Sometimes you need an expert to explain to you that you do have options – that's what my McGrath Breast Care Nurse has done and that has helped me greatly. I have access to her 24/7 – whenever I need her, she's available.

When I was diagnosed I found that there were a lot of medical answers and opinions on metastatic breast cancer but there weren't many personal stories. So I wanted to tell my story and make people aware it's not just older women that get this diagnosis, it's younger women as well. If women find the smallest little lump, they should get it checked.

Candy Kuan

Candy is 46 years old and she is from Hong Kong. She has been married for 23 years and has three children. She was diagnosed with stage III breast cancer in 2008 and spends most days volunteering at the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation.





Watch Candy's
video

“I want to help others like they helped me.”

I examine my breasts every month. One day when bathing I found there was a green bean sized lump in my right breast and I showed my husband that night. He was very worried and asked me to see the gynecologist as soon as possible. The doctor helped me check and told me I also had a lump in my left breast, too. I then had a mammogram and the doctor told me that my cells were not “good-looking”. I didn’t know what it meant so she said that normal cells were round, but my cells were star-like. Then I began to shiver, and my voice started to tremble.

The worse thing was seeing my husband cry. When we walked to the train station afterwards, my husband suddenly burst into tears. I told

him not to worry; I was fine and asked him to be confident in me and the doctor. My husband reacted more emotionally than me because he was not prepared, and our relationship is really good. Over the years he has not once shouted at me. I was very sad at that moment because I had never seen my husband like this – he has always been very calm. We were both so distraught that we forgot that we had actually driven to the doctors and instead headed home on the train.

I didn’t want to go to the Breast Cancer Foundation (BCF) at the beginning, but my husband kept asking me to go. I didn’t want to let him down, so I agreed to go.





I thought the Foundation was a very strange place. I thought it would be sad and full of tears but when I went there, patients were laughing so happily. I looked at each person and thought these people are having chemotherapy so how can they go out on their own? Shouldn't they sit in a wheelchair and be pushed? Why did they look so healthy? I realised that I misinterpreted chemotherapy which stopped me from receiving it, but when I saw people who had completed chemotherapy, some of whom were even older than me, I gained confidence.

After completing radiotherapy and chemotherapy, I saw the oncologist and he said I needed to take hormonal drugs, but if I took them I couldn't get pregnant. I was unhappy because I still wanted more children, so I told my husband I wouldn't take the drugs. For perhaps the first time in our marriage he responded very fiercely to me and said, "The treatment is the first priority, do not even mention pregnancy. We should follow the doctor's advice and take the medicine." I was grateful to my husband for his understanding, and I knew he loved me so much – all that mattered to him was my life.

In fact we now have even better family relationships due to my illness. Although the relationship between my immediate family, my parents and my sisters had always been good, my cancer strengthened my family's bonds. A friend of mine came to visit me and said: "Wow, all the rooms are full of beds!" That's because there were 10 people living with us and helping us – it looked like a dormitory!



I have been a volunteer at BCF for many years, supporting people who are currently undergoing chemotherapy. If there had not been a volunteer to help me, I would not have dared to undergo chemotherapy and my health wouldn't be so positive now, so I want to help others like they helped me. Since then, I have helped out at BCF without a break and I sometimes accompany others to the hospital until late at night. Many friends always ask me to not just help other people, but to take care of myself too. My husband does not complain and just asks me not to work too hard, but I am glad to help others. I have walked their path and understand their thoughts and concerns.

Vivian Lee

Vivian is 62 years old and lives in Hong Kong. She was first diagnosed with stage II breast cancer in 2009. Recently widowed with a son and a daughter, she worked for the same bank for more than 36 years before retiring after her cancer metastasised to her bones in 2016.





“No one teaches you how to face cancer. The only way is to learn as you go and get as much information as you can from people who face the same problem.”



Watch Vivian's video

“To a certain extent, the disease is a blessing.”

It was just a small lump. I thought it was a blocked duct or something similar because I used to breastfeed my babies - it never crossed my mind that it would be a medical problem. When I knew I had breast cancer, I really panicked.

When I was diagnosed with cancer, I did a series of tests which said it was Stage II. I knew very little about the disease at the time, so when my family doctor explained all the necessary steps, my husband and I quickly decided to have surgery as soon as possible.

Throughout my treatment, I solely relied on my husband. At the time, my daughter was in Japan and my son was about to go to Australia for further studies. I received counselling from a nurse at the breast cancer centre as I was

depressed because I was ill and my children were not around. But my husband talked to me and said that at their stage of learning, I should let them study overseas rather than keep them around. We both agreed that as far as possible my family should not be affected by my disease. No one teaches you how to be a mother - or how to face cancer. The only way is to learn as you go and get as much information as you can from people who face the same problem.

My parents took good care of me: I had all my meals at their home or my mother came over and cooked. They supported me a lot. Family support is so important - I realised family is something irreplaceable and they gave unconditionally. My husband never left me; he was always around.



“I saw a beautiful red flower, the weather is good...”

I was often in a bad mood so to help deal with my emotions a volunteer at the Breast Cancer Foundation suggested that I start to write things down that cheered me up. For example, I write that ‘today I’m able to walk the streets for 15 minutes, I saw a beautiful red flower, the weather is good...’ things like that. As well as this, our weekly group gatherings where we share our stories at the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation gave me a lot of encouragement. Our Foundation also operates a group chat via our phones and we share positive messages every day. I also gained a lot from the Foundation, so I am determined to work as a volunteer here after I recover.

Though the cancer has recurred, I am able to face it bravely thanks to all the support I receive from other patients. Cancer has certainly brought great changes to my outlook on life. I used to work in a bank under a tight schedule. I put myself under huge pressure. All I knew was to make money for myself and my family. Now, I understand that life is about more than making money.

To a certain extent, the disease is a blessing: it has helped me to reflect and start afresh. The disease could be a gift that allows us to rethink our mistakes or deficiencies in the past, and gives us a chance to let us improve. I have also realised that love is the important thing. I can feel love from my family, friends, other patients, nurses and doctors.



Jeon Young-Sun

Young-Sun is 60 years old and was born in China but moved to Seoul, South Korea 10 years ago to join her husband. She is now a widow and has one son and one granddaughter. She was first diagnosed with early breast cancer in 2010 and five years later the cancer metastasised to her lungs.



When I arrived in Korea, I worked really hard for the first two years. I thought I had lost weight because I had to take care of my husband. I did not think it was because of breast cancer.

In Korea you are offered a health check up biennially. I had one in 2008 which came back negative and then I had another in 2010. The doctors saw something suspicious in my right breast and asked me to come back for another check. If I touched my breast, it felt completely normal and there was no pain whatsoever. But I was very tired all the time. Back then my husband was not well and I took care of him for almost a year and a half, so I thought that was why I was feeling so weary.

I asked the doctors how serious my condition was and he said I was stage 0 to stage I. My son was still in China, and my husband was in intensive care. I still had to work because I was short of money. I had only lived in Korea for three years, so I was a year short of getting citizenship. That meant I could not apply for Korean health insurance. I was worried about my life after the surgery because I would be uninsured. I didn't know what to do and my son did not have a permanent job.

After the surgery, the results showed I had stage II cancer. And out of eight lymph nodes that were inspected, three had metastasised. Then I received eight rounds of chemotherapy and later 36 rounds of radiation therapy.

“You don't have to consider yourself a patient.”



Watch
Young-Sun's
video



“I am so fortunate to have come to Korea.”



When I received radiation therapy, I would feel really depressed. I would cry when I got home because I didn't have anyone to talk to as by then my husband had died. I became depressed and was bored. But I dealt with this by reading books and my son gave me strength and kept me motivated. I thought that if I am sick, I will be a burden to my son so I must get well soon.

I decided to learn more about cancer. So I bought a book called 'We must know about cancer to survive'. In the past, people thought that if you have cancer you will die, but medical advances have allowed people to survive if the cancer is found early. The book tells people with cancer to have hope and I was very encouraged. I also decided to study philosophy.

I also feel lucky as Korea has an advanced medical system. Had I been China, I would have been dead by now as there were no biennial health check ups when I lived there. I am so fortunate to have come to Korea. When I had been in Korea for four years I received citizenship which meant I could access the welfare system which was a huge relief.

I felt fine but went to see my doctor in November 2014 for a check up. I had a CT scan which showed that the cancer had metastasised to my lungs. I didn't feel myself cry but I saw tears fall from my eyes. The doctor told me to trust him. He comforted me and said that he would do his best to save me and that there were a lot of drugs available. It was really encouraging. It was nice of him to say this and it gave me so much hope.



I would like to tell other women with metastatic breast cancer that they don't have to consider themselves patients. I can cook, I can move. Drugs nowadays are very powerful.

Now, my family have joined me in Korea and it energizes me to see my family happy.

Park Yun-He

Yun-He is 54 years old and lives in Seoul, South Korea with her parents and two children who are in their twenties. She was first diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer in 2014 and in 2016 the cancer spread further to her brain. Up until her diagnosis, she worked as a beauty therapist.





“I’m so thankful to those who care for me.”

I was diagnosed in April 2014. I went to the doctors because there was something wrong with my body. I found a big lump: It started out small but had gradually become bigger.

The doctor told me that it was cancer, but he didn't tell me that it had metastasised in case I got worried. The doctor told my family but didn't tell me. I found out afterwards. When I was diagnosed my first thoughts were, did I do something wrong in the past or did I not bring my children up properly? I raised my children by myself. I had worked very hard bringing them up and so when I got cancer it was very difficult at first. My mother is 70 and is also not well. She had hip surgery twice and treatment for tongue cancer, so the news was a big shock to us all.

I started treatment for stage IV cancer immediately, and I was going to have surgery after four rounds of chemotherapy but I only had two rounds in the end as the tumour did not get smaller. Losing my hair was the toughest part. When my hair started falling out... I felt like Gollum! I had surgery in June 2014 and throughout my children were brave. They must have been upset in their hearts, but I think my mother told them not to express it.

Not long after my surgery I fainted at home. I was taken to hospital and tests showed that the cancer had spread to my brain. This caused a lot of panic: I thought I was going to die. I was in the emergency room when I woke up.

The doctor didn't directly tell me that the cancer had spread to my brain in case I got worried. He just told me my brain was swollen and not to be anxious.

I don't normally get stressed easily, but when I eventually found out the cancer had spread to my brain, I was very shocked and it was difficult for me. But I don't dwell on things, so I'm fine now.

I haven't joined any patient groups as I prefer to spend time with my friends. I get along with other patients in hospital but I don't keep in touch. I have a lot of friends from school, and they come to visit me and make me things to eat. Since the cancer spread, I can't walk for long periods of time. I get dizzy. But I feel positive as

the doctors have told me that the x-rays show that the cancer in my brain has got smaller so I should soon feel better.

I also got some strength from reading books on cancer. I realised that there are ways to deal with my disease. I am mostly getting through this on my own. I think I must get through this, as my children are still young, so I try not to get stressed and stay positive. My son and daughter tell me I don't act like a cancer patient!

You have to simply get on with life. You can't dwell on things. I'm forever thankful to my parents. My father is over 80, and my mother is 70, but they still make me food when I'm the one who should be taking care of them. I'm so thankful to those who care for me.



“You have to simply get on with life.”



Shim Ok-Bun

Ok-Bun is 48 years old and lives in Seoul, South Korea. She is married with two sons who are in their twenties. She suffered a cerebral haemorrhage in 2005 which has caused long-term mobility problems and in 2015 she was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer.





“My children give me so much strength.”

The lump looked like a pimple. I went to the pharmacy and they told me it looked inflamed so I applied some ointment and took anti-inflammatory medicine. But it became bigger and bigger and I thought what if this is cancer? I ignored it and didn't want to have it investigated because I was scared. I didn't think I could live if I was diagnosed with cancer - I didn't think I would want to live.

But the day before Thanksgiving in 2015, blood burst from the lump so I was taken to the emergency room. The blood kept spilling out and it didn't stop. I was at home so I asked my son to call for an ambulance.

All I could think about was that tomorrow was Thanksgiving and my mother-in-law and family

should have a happy holiday but instead they would be feeling sad because of me. So I asked the hospital to just stop the bleeding and said I would come back after Thanksgiving.

When I returned to see a doctor, he took a look and said I needed a biopsy straightaway which confirmed it was metastatic breast cancer. As we were going home and waiting for the car, my son was standing next to me and when I saw him, I felt so sad that I wouldn't be able to see my sons if I died. So tears started coming and my son saw them and said “Mom, why are you crying? You're not going to die.” When I got home my younger son said you have to smile to live. He told me to watch comedy programs and force myself to laugh sometimes.





I talked to my doctor and said that he had to help me live as I wanted to live for my sons. The lump was too big so they told me it had to be shrunk first. I underwent chemotherapy 24 times and I then had radiation therapy but the cancer has now spread to my bones.

Ten years ago I fainted and hit my head. Part of my skull was pushed in which resulted in a cerebral haemorrhage and I needed surgery. I lost the use of half my body, and as a result, I couldn't do a lot for the kids when they were young. So now I try to take care of them as much as possible. My husband is also very kind. He comes to the hospital with me and he must also be tired but he doesn't show it.

I get a lot of pleasure and strength from cooking for my children. I love to make them lots of side dishes. I go to the supermarket dozens of times a day as I can't buy everything at once so

I buy things one at a time to make food for my children. It's a strain on my body, but it makes me so happy. At that moment I forget that I'm a breast cancer patient - I'm a mother.

Even during all my treatment, I still wake up at six in the morning to cook for them and pack them lunch.

I laugh a lot when looking at my children. Looking at the children that I gave birth to makes me happy. I have eyes only for my children and for my family. When people ask me how I cope, I say I try and laugh. Isn't it better to laugh? My sons tell me to laugh as much as possible.

My children give me so much strength. And breast cancer is not something you die from right away. Whether I live one year, two years or 100 years, I want to keep laughing.

Chan Oi Kwan

Oi Kwan is 48 years old and is from Macau. She was diagnosed with breast cancer and lung cancer in June 2012 and both cancers metastasised shortly after. Oi Kwan spends most of her time volunteering at her cancer support group Associação de Feliz Paraíso.





Watch Oi Kwan's video



“Whenever a new patient comes, I will ask her to try to not be afraid.”

I had of course heard of cancer, but I never thought it would happen to me. No one in my family had ever had cancer and they are all very healthy.

I was diagnosed when the doctor found something in my left breast. After it was removed, it was shown to be malignant. I had my entire left breast removed, and at the same time, doctors found a tumour in my lung. It was very difficult for me to accept the news and I collapsed.

The doctor told me that chemotherapy and radiotherapy were required. The lung tumour also needed to be removed as soon as possible; otherwise it would cause major problems. Yet,

just three months later, when we were about to remove the lung tumour, my doctors discovered that the two cancers had metastasised at the same time. Unfortunately the drugs for breast cancer and lung cancer don't work together, so I was in great pain.

Being a part of Associação de Feliz Paraíso changed everything. The association supports anyone with cancer and I have been inspired greatly since I joined them. There are a lot of brothers and sisters here to support, help and care for each other. When you are in pain, there is someone to encourage you; when you smile, there is someone to share the joy with you. Here, you are free to say anything. We are like a big family who encourage each other.



“Being a part of Associação de Feliz Paraíso changed everything.”



The association started when a group of patients were receiving their injections at the same time. More and more people gradually joined, and the oncology department saw that the group was helping people and asked us to find a place to talk and share our stories.

Many cancer patients are very frightened when they learn of their illness, but we encourage them to keep strong. We pay visits to the needy, we volunteer, and we go out and eat together and have a good time. We sometimes visit a hospice where patients are very happy to see us. We bring along soup and congee and give patients a little warmth.

The association operates every Tuesday and Saturday afternoon. Sometimes, nurses will come to chat with us, as do Chinese medicine practitioners who come in and offer voluntary consultations. They are enthusiastic about helping cancer patients overcome difficulties. I am very grateful to them.

We often have many new patients asking for help, so we, as "old hands," encourage them, give them as much knowledge as we can to ease their anxiety and help them understand how to deal with their psychological and daily needs. Whenever a new patient comes, I will ask her to try to not be afraid because I have been through what you are going through. All of us will support you and love you.



Lim Ai Li

Ai Li is Malaysian and is married with three children. She is 48 years old and was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007. Shortly afterwards a bone scan showed that the cancer had spread. She has been living with metastatic breast cancer for nearly 10 years.

“There is always hope.”





“February 2017 will be ten years since I was diagnosed.”

I was first diagnosed when my eldest daughter was nine and my youngest was three years old. I really had no idea about breast cancer. One of my aunts had breast cancer but at that time I was very young and still at school. Another aunt was diagnosed with cervical cancer and one uncle had colon cancer. The whole family was very worried, but it didn't cross my mind that I would get breast cancer one day.

I wasn't told it was cancer straightaway. The clinic called me and said that you need to come in and it's better if you bring your husband along. When you're told this, you know something is not right. I was driving with my youngest daughter, and I stopped the car and had a good cry.

I had a mastectomy done on the third day of Chinese New Year and before my oncologist started me on chemotherapy he sent me for a bone scan. This showed that my cancer had metastasised to the frontal bone in my skull. So I was automatically upgraded to stage IV. I was in shock. And also angry. I kept asking, why me and not other people? I didn't have a bad lifestyle – I don't smoke, I don't drink and I eat healthily so I didn't understand why it had to be me.

I was not very worried about the staging. What I was more worried about was having cancer when my kids were so young – would I live to see my kids grow up? It was a very sad scenario. I had six cycles of chemotherapy and 25 cycles

of radiotherapy and during treatment, the most important inspiration was my three kids. I kept on telling myself, I want to see my children grow up and I want to see my children go through university. I want to see my children get married and I want to be a grandmother! That's what kept me going.

Recently my past three PET scans have showed that there are no active cells so there has been no evidence of disease for the past few years. This February in 2017 will be ten years since I was diagnosed. I am feeling fine now. Every moment I am living my life to the fullest. Before I was diagnosed, every time I wanted to do something I had to think twice or thrice, but now I don't think as much and whatever I want to do, I go ahead and do it.

I've changed a lot. Sometimes I've felt that cancer is actually good for me in that I've changed my lifestyle, I've changed my personality. I didn't have many friends before. I used to be a very quiet person. But now, I've become more talkative!





“The most important inspiration is my three kids.”



I share my story. If I go shopping in the ladies' department and people try and sell me a bra, I will tell them, no, this is not for me, because I had a mastectomy and I can't fit this kind of bra! This is something that I wouldn't have done before cancer. Now I am more open and tell people that I am a breast cancer survivor.

There are many survivors living with advanced cancer, and there are lots of different types of patients - those like me who have completed

treatment and are living normally, people who are still having treatment and there are people fighting for their life this minute. So I want to let people know that they are not alone, and they can have a normal life. If I can, and I am just a normal person, then I am sure that they can do it!

Cancer is not a death sentence, so don't be afraid. There is always hope.

Jenny Tan

Jenny lives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and is 39 years old. She was diagnosed with early breast cancer in 2007. In 2010, she was told that the cancer had spread to her liver and brain. She works full time in legal operations at a bank and is also an officer at the Pink Ribbon Wellness Foundation, a breast cancer charity.



“This cancer isn’t
going to control me.”



“My support group were with me all the time.”

The first time I was diagnosed with breast cancer I was 27. Because I was young, I was in denial. I thought cancer was genetic but I didn't have any family history, so I told myself it could be wrong. But my doctor said it was not: you have to accept it.

The thing that freaked me out was the treatment. I was afraid of losing my hair more than I was afraid of cancer. I found a thousand ways to escape chemotherapy. My doctors said once your hair falls out, it will grow back longer and shinier. But I gave a lot of reasons – I said I wished to get pregnant... every reason to escape! In the end I won, and I got hormonal treatment to replace chemotherapy.

For two years, nothing happened. Then I had my yearly check up and a PET scan detected something in my chest wall and rib cage. The doctor told me that this time I had to go through chemotherapy - I couldn't escape it anymore. Fortunately, this time I had the support of my friends from the Pink Ribbon Wellness Foundation. I have a lot of sisters there. When they heard I had relapsed and that I have to go through chemotherapy everyone called and said don't worry, it's not as horrible as you think. They shared their experience with me and they walked with me on my journey. My support group was with me all the time.

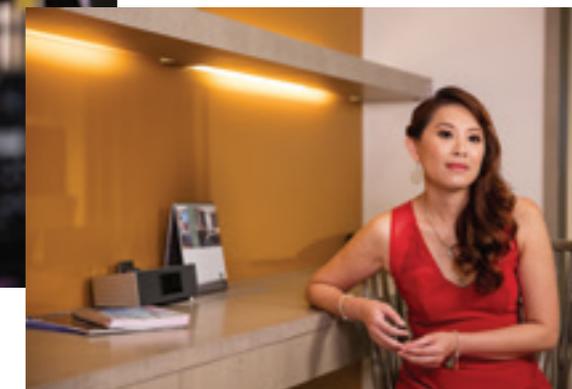


Watch Jenny's
video





“I danced throughout my chemo, I didn’t want to stop.”



I had a relationship breakdown when I was doing chemotherapy. During treatment my boyfriend didn't really care. I'd have to beg him to accompany me to the hospital. On my fifth cycle of chemotherapy I was very weak and had to be hospitalised for a day. He came and saw me but was very busy and kept looking at his watch. He didn't want to be there. It seemed that work was much more important than me so I said why don't you just leave. I was quite sad as this was the moment when I needed him the most.

I didn't get his support or his family's support. His mum told him, why would you choose a sick girlfriend when you can get a healthy one? I can't give any children to him and he is her only son so I just let go. I took the words of his mum very deeply. I told myself during treatment, I have to do better, I will show you that I will heal. After letting go, I wished him all the best. I think that I am a better person now.

Now I spend most of my time with my support group. I go dancing – Latin, Ballet and Ballroom

– as I love to dance. I danced throughout my chemotherapy – I didn't want to stop. After a hard day you will always see me in a studio. I dance out all my anger, all my stress, and that makes me feel better.

I also got a tattoo when I had my relapse - a butterfly in a cocoon. It represents a new beginning, a new me. My tattoo is a reminder that I have come back from cancer five times and so every day is a bonus. There is no point in crying and asking why me? I have found a way to make myself happy and enjoy my life.

The way I look at cancer is that it is there in your body – it lives with you. So I try and live with it happily. Everyone says it's good to make friends with your enemy. This cancer isn't going to control me. So I tell the cancer, don't disturb my body and I won't disturb you.

Loga Crichton

Loga is 57 and lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand and is the mother of eight children. She is a social services team leader at a medical and community support clinic that primarily caters to New Zealand's Pacific people. Loga was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1992. Nearly twenty years later in 2011, Loga was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. She continues to work full time and fundraise for the New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation. In 2014 she won The New Zealand Herald "Getting on with it" Award and has had a book of poetry published.





Watch Loga's
interview



“My cancer journey is just a piece of the puzzle of my life.”

Before I was diagnosed the first time in 1992, my only experience with cancer was reading in magazines about actresses who had the disease. I never dreamed it was coming my way. My journey with breast cancer began when I was 31, shortly after the death of my son who died when he was one month old. Treatment lasted nine months and I didn't share what I was going through with anyone as I didn't want to worry them. I'd never known anyone to have had breast cancer or actually any cancer, and for islanders, cancer means death because many people in the past didn't have treatment.

After my treatment I then had check-ups every three months and eventually they stopped as I'd been clear for a long time.

Then in 2011, it was Saturday morning. I remember it well as the Tsunami had just struck Japan. My husband was watching TV and I walked in and said how sad it was. And then I said to him, “we could have a tsunami in our lives at any moment,” and he didn't know what I meant. But I walked away and had a good cry, as I knew something was wrong with me and I suspected that the cancer had come back. I went to the doctors and had a mammogram which confirmed it.

I am the team lead at work but I also work along the health promotion team who are responsible for breast screening.



We often find that Pacific women don't want to pursue treatment so I get asked to support them and go along with them to talk to doctors. These women have heard a lot of stories and get wrong information: one woman was told if she had an operation she would die, things like that. So I often tell my personal story which helps. Because my first treatment was so long ago, I'm living testimony of the amazing medications we have nowadays.

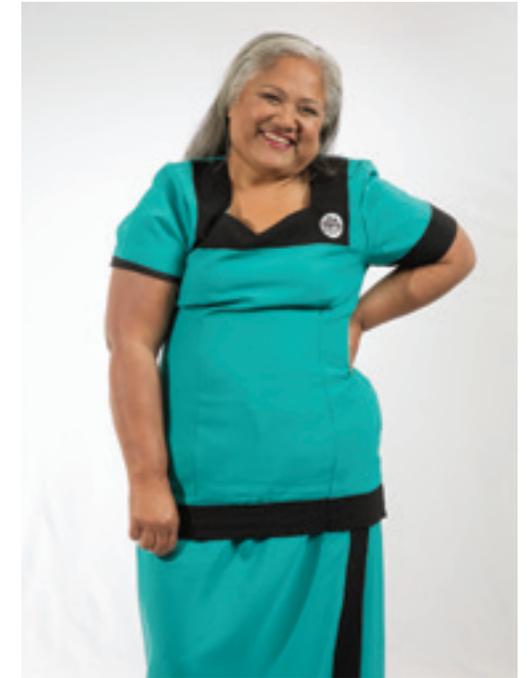
It is very important for women to ask their doctors questions. Many just nod their heads and say that they understand when they don't. It's really important that women are explained to in everyday language what medicine they are taking. When I got my first diagnosis, I don't think I asked any questions. It's really important to ask questions as to have breast cancer is life-changing for women, and it's not just us that are going through it, it's our daughters, our husbands and everyone who is supporting us.



“I’m sharing my story, but it’s not about me. It’s about my daughters, Pacific women, my sisters, my friends.”

Three years ago I had genetic tests done which revealed I had the BRCA1 gene, so I had surgery to remove my breasts and my ovaries. I got home on Friday and my husband suddenly passed away on Saturday. Because of my grief I couldn't sleep and started to write down my thoughts on my iPad and these became poems. Writing the poems definitely acted as a form of therapy. A woman who was visiting my house saw a copy of my poem about my husband on the wall and then asked if I had any more. She was a children's book author and she showed them to her publisher so now I have a book! I've been told that what comes through my poems is a message of hope.

I'm sharing my story, but it's not about me. It's about my daughters, Pacific women, my sisters, my friends. And I do think that the reason I have gone through this is so that I can support others. I would like to tell other women that treatment these days is much better and so much more advanced as knowledge has improved. And my journey is just a piece of the puzzle of my life.



Jasmine Low

Jasmine is 52 years old and is married with two children in their twenties. She lives in Singapore and spends much of her time volunteering at her local temple. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2013 and six months after her initial diagnosis, the cancer metastasised to her sternum.





Watch Jasmine's
interview



“Happiness doesn’t come from money or wealth but from bonds and friendship as well as love for others.”

I was first diagnosed in 2013 when a mammogram found a lesion. I didn't have any symptoms, but the cancer was quite advanced already. I am quite stubborn – I didn't want to go for chemotherapy or any other conventional treatment at that time. Back then, to me, cancer was like a death sentence, and I thought I will concentrate on living to the fullest – spending whatever time I had with my family was my only concern.

Six months later I went for a further scan and they found that there was no improvement, so for my family I decided to go for treatment. I went in for surgery to have a mastectomy but

unfortunately one day before my operation they found out that it had spread to the sternum. Both of my doctors suggested I do other therapies instead of surgery. It was devastating news. I did hormonal therapy for eight months but it wasn't successful as the tumour ulcerated.

I started meditation before my diagnosis and I am very grateful that I did, as I feel that I am much calmer when things happen and I can face anything. I am able to accept these circumstances that have happened to me. I do of course go through stages such as, why me, why did I have to get this thing?

“I treasure every moment that I have.”



But mindfulness teaches you to be aware of what is happening around you and being mindful in whatever actions you do and how you speak to others. Mindfulness has really helped me get through this experience - I am able to take the shock of my cancer. There are some people that can't accept their diagnosis at all.

I go to classes once a week on a Sunday and I practice at home as well. It has made a difference to my temper and I am probably more gentle in my speech. I used to be very agitated and very rushed. My husband tells me that I used to get very stressed over small matters. We are much closer as a family now.

After stopping work, I have more free time and I help out at my temple and have taken up classes like yoga and calligraphy. It gives me peace and I believe that exercise is very important. I see people around me - we are all so busy, rushing for work and living hectic lifestyles. My life is so different and I feel like I am enjoying myself, even when I am doing simple tasks. I believe I am getting peace from all the things that I am doing.

In Buddhism we say that we are grateful for everything, and my situation has made me realise the importance of living moment by moment and enjoying whatever time I have with my family and friends.

Since my diagnosis, I treasure every moment of my life - even the simplest tasks or just chatting with friends. Life doesn't stop after you're diagnosed with cancer - you still have to go on. We have to be positive and spend whatever time we have in a positive way.

It has also made me realise where happiness really comes from - its not from money or wealth but its from bonds and friendship as well as love for others.

I don't think so much about the future - I am living moment to moment. I do have plans but I am not that attached to them - I will let life flow and face it naturally.

Cho Chia-Jung

Chia-Jung is 48 years old and lives in Taipei, Taiwan with her husband and 17 year old daughter. She was first diagnosed with stage II breast cancer when she was 40 and the cancer metastasised to her liver four years later.



“Every moment I have with my family is precious.”

I was diagnosed at the end of 2008. I found a lump in my breast and I looked up information online – it said it was unlikely to be malignant if it was painful which it was, so I just ignored it. However, a week later it seemed to get bigger. A doctor checked me and referred me to a breast surgeon and I was diagnosed with breast cancer straight away.

I was very shocked. I didn't believe I would have breast cancer as I was healthy - I went to bed early every night, had a regular routine and ate home-cooked meals.

The doctor advised me to undergo surgery and chemotherapy, but I have been frail since I was a child, so my family thought we should

cure the cancer by looking for its root cause and try complementary therapy. I tried Chinese medicine and also received homeotherapy for two months. But I was anxious about relying on these methods as I was meeting many cancer patients who shared their experiences. From their stories, I realised that orthodox treatment would still be needed, so I began to have western medicine.

My family fully supported me, including my brother and sister. They helped me take care of my daughter, shopped for us and cooked for us. Their support meant that I could complete the full course of chemotherapy which I found quite hard. To help me, they took me to temples to worship Buddha and brought me nutritious food.

 Watch Chia-Jung's interview



“I am still here and still breathing.”



In June 2012 I felt a sting in my lower abdomen, but I thought I was healthy because I practised Qi Gong [similar to Tai chi] twice a day. My doctor arranged an abdomen ultrasound for me and the results showed a tumour in the liver. My daughter had just graduated from primary school. I was shocked by the relapse, and felt betrayed by my body. I had stopped working and taken good care of my own body, so why did this happen?

This time around treatment was more tiring and frustrating. I had to take a lot of medicine to cure the pain in my bones, headaches, insomnia, diarrhoea, constipation... I found it very challenging and was very depressed.

A sister of another patient persuaded me to go to a mindfulness class organised by a support group. All I wanted to do was lie at home all day, but she, as well as social workers from the foundation, continued to encourage me so I took the course. The lecturer was very warm and

even though I rejected my ill self, she accepted me and encouraged me. I felt very relaxed throughout the course and the lecturer taught me to think of three questions every day. First, am I breathing? It seems stupid, but it means I am still alive. Second, am I aware that I am breathing? In mindfulness, you use the breath as an anchor, keeping us connected and engaged to the present. Third, I ask myself whether my mind is consistent with my acts.

My parents are more than 80 years old. Because of my illness, they are so worried. I have felt a lot of guilt and sorrow about my family. I have brought so much trouble to them and they are so old. I'm sorry to my husband as well: we swore to live together, but I will be leaving him soon. I'm sorry to hurt my daughter as well. But after learning mindfulness, I realise that every moment I have with my family is precious. I am now content when I realise that when I wake up every day, I am still here and still breathing.

Huang Hsiao-Feng

Hsiao-Feng is 44 years old and lives in Taipei, Taiwan with her husband and two children. She was first diagnosed with breast cancer when she was 33 in 2005. Four years later her cancer recurred and in 2015 it metastasised to her lungs.





Watch Hsiao-Feng's interview

“I know that even when I am lost, I will be able to find my way.”

I was having a bath and I saw that my nipple was bleeding. I went for a check-up the next day and there I met my doctor who has been taking care of me ever since.

I feel very lucky that I met my doctor. When I knew nothing about cancer, he made me trust him, listened to my fears and helped me be brave. I have experienced many ups and downs over the years, so I am very grateful to him. I don't think every physician is willing to spend as much time listening to their patients.

When I was first diagnosed I was scared and shocked. It was like getting hit by thunder, and I felt defeated and didn't know what to do.

Fortunately, my family and friends were very supportive. My children were still very young, so my mother and brother helped me take care of them, and my husband stayed with me in the hospital.

After the cancer metastasised last year, I felt close to death, and I thought that time is very short. I didn't know if I had enough time to do what I've always wanted to do, so I decided I would cherish every moment. Now I make good use of time.



“I hope to live an ordinary, yet wonderful, life.”



I have been sick for more than a decade, but I have been supported by a lot of friends, so I am full of happiness. I cherish my time and do different things - I do voluntary work at a shelter for underprivileged children from Southeast Asia. I might be taking care of them, but they take care of me too - I have a lot of fun! I might be helping them, but they've healed me.

I also attend a painting class. I used to dream of painting, but I never had the chance to learn, so I seized this opportunity to show people how, through my paintings, that I can do ordinary but wonderful things. I like painting because it feels like I am going back to my childhood, to something pure and happy.

I want to thank so many people who have helped me, and in particular, my family. They have given me the greatest support for my whole journey. I would also like to thank my physician who has looked after me with great patience for 11 years. My thanks can't be expressed by words. I would also like to thank my religious mentor: I know that even when I am lost, I will be able to find my way.

I have been blessed since I was small. My family took good care of me and I grew up with plenty of love. But I would seldom reflect on these good things before I got ill. Now I know I am really blessed, and I cherish what I have now and hope to live an ordinary, yet wonderful, life.



Jureerat Hirunyakarn

Jureerat is 48 years old and lives in Bangkok, Thailand where she runs a shop with her sister. She was diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer when she was 38 years old. The cancer has now metastasised to her lungs, bones and liver. She is divorced with one teenage son.

“I have changed from the person I was.”





Watch Jureerat's
interview

“We have to dare to dream, to dream big.”

In April 2007, I had some pain in my left breast and a hard lump. I found it on the Monday and saw a doctor on Thursday. He examined me, and I looked at his face. He'd gone pale, and he immediately said it wasn't looking good.

My biopsy results came back after seven days and the tumour was 4.5 centimetres so the cancer was stage II and approaching stage III. The doctor advised three doses of chemotherapy and then a breast-conserving mastectomy, which removed the tumour, followed by another three rounds of chemotherapy.

During my first treatment, I got to rest and didn't work. I began to study the Dharma [the

teachings of the Buddha] and started to think more about life. I came to understand that whatever problems I'd come across, I'd been looking at them the wrong way. I had clung on to anger and hatred. For example, I found it very difficult to deal with my son's autism. I wanted to understand why I reacted like that. The readings made me understand – I needed to let go.

Before cancer I was like many Thai people and had just a basic understanding of Buddhism. I prayed, paid respect to Buddhist images and gave food offerings to monks, but I didn't understand the real essence of the religion. But now I have studied the five precepts, the ethical principles that all Buddhists live by.





“I needed to let go.”

I had my first relapse in June 2011 and needed 12 more rounds of chemotherapy. Then in 2013, I discovered that my breast was full of tumours. I had my ovaries removed in 2014 when I discovered that the disease had metastasised to my bones and lungs. The doctor said if I'd seen him a little later, I'd have been paralysed because a tumour in my neck would have suppressed my spinal cord. I needed to have ten radiation doses and after that my pain was gone, and the size of the tumour in my neck reduced. I felt fully recovered.

I was well for about two years before the latest recurrence. My cancer has further metastasised to the liver, and the bones in my right shoulder, back and right hip. I'm currently waiting to start radiation therapy.

I have changed from the person I was – a person with a lot of anger and hatred who expected things to be as I wished. We can't change anybody, can we? We have to learn to let go and to be calmer. I believe in good karma and that the universe will bring us what we want and what we desire. When we are ill, we have to think that we are healthy and that we have fully recovered. I think that the subconscious mind senses and responds to positive thinking.

It was my dream that one day I might be able to help cancer patients like me live happy lives. In order to get something, we have to dare to dream, to dream big. People with stage IV cancer should not get discouraged.

Today's treatment is excellent and medications work very well. And don't be afraid of treatment: altogether I have had 18 doses of chemotherapy; I glided through them.

Remember: being born isn't easy; it's very hard. We're the result of one sperm that had to beat millions of others to be born. That was very hard, but we were the ones who got to be born. So why not live our lives to the fullest?



Wittawat Lohamas - the husband

Wittawat lives in Bangkok, Thailand with his wife Noon and their two young children and runs a café in the city. Noon was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer in 2012 when she was 29 years old. After her diagnosis, Wittawat began a Facebook page called 'Noon Super Mom' which he uses to share their story; the page now has more than 500,000 fans including doctors, nurses, patients and caregivers.





Watch Wittawat's interview

“We never know what the future will be.”

I met her in an online chatroom! I don't even remember where I got her account details, but my company sent me to Boston for a few months and the time difference between the US and Thailand is 12 hours. I logged on at lunchtime and it was midnight in Thailand and she was the only person there! I talked with her everyday for four months. When I came back we had dinner and this was the beginning of my family. Two years later we got married - I was 28, my wife was 24.

Before Noon's diagnosis, she worked very hard, making cakes to sell and taking care of our children. One day she felt quite weak with stomach pains. She was afraid to go to the hospital to see the doctor, but she did go to a small private clinic near our house. The doctor said she had an enlarged liver and we went to the hospital the next day. The physicians did a

lot of tests and said she had a very big tumour in her liver as well as lots of lesions. She cried, but I knew I must be strong for her. About a week later we were told it was metastatic breast cancer. She was 29 - too young to think about cancer.

The first treatment didn't give her too much trouble – just a bit of fever – but the following treatments were much harder. I was working while taking care of her but eventually I got fired. This is why I opened the coffee shop. I was a project manager and I needed to meet with clients and I couldn't do it. I knew it would happen someday, so I was prepared for it. I couldn't find a job in my industry, so we turned our hobby of making cakes into a business. We started three years ago and the business is going well and we supply many of the big Thai coffee shop brands.





I set up my Facebook page because I wanted to express my feelings. I find it difficult to talk directly and share my emotional state when I see my wife. So I used my page like a diary and shared it with my friends on Facebook. They shared it with others and the number of fans has gone from 100 people to 1,000 to about 500,000 people. I post everyday and I feel good when people, especially patients with metastatic breast cancer like my wife, see that she can talk, walk, do almost every activity. Quite a lot of people see my Facebook page - doctors, nurses, patients, families... many of them try to support us in different ways. Doctors give advice, some people come to my shop and buy things - they want to support us that way.

I never expected my story to be so widely read by people. My page is about love, it's about family, and I never expected it to be so impactful. It's about knowledge sharing, how to live with cancer and show love.

Some days we get very good news, some days we get very bad news – this is nature. I have always believed that we need to stay in the present, but staying in the present doesn't mean not moving. We move to new treatments; we are always looking for new treatments for her.

Before Noon's diagnosis, I was a hard worker, I tried to find ways to make a lot of money but when my wife was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, what was the point of the money I had saved for 10 years? So I changed my thinking. Money is OK but the thing we really need is happiness.

In terms of treatments, she still has options. We never know what the future will be.

In the past there was a time where my wife took care of me and now it's the time for me to give back to her. I don't feel qualified to give advice to other husbands and each family has their own history, but for me, there was never any other option than to take care of my wife.



“We need to stay in the present, but staying in the present doesn't mean not moving.”

Ireal Traisarnsri

Ireal, from Bangkok, Thailand, is the founder of Art for Cancer, a charity that raises money for breast cancer patients, a committee member and former president of the Thailand Breast Cancer Community (TBCC) and also helps run her family business. She was diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer when she was 27 years old in 2012.





Watch Ireal's
interview



“If you can use your ability or creativity to add value to other people, it’s more impactful.”

I found a lump in my breast when I was 27 years old. At the time I was in the UK to prepare for the start of a Masters degree in English Language. Two months later I went back to Thailand and saw a doctor then. I didn't think much of it – I thought it was maybe a cyst but nothing to really worry about. I heard from friends that cysts or lumps were not dangerous. I met two doctors: the first said it was OK and nothing to worry about. He said to go back to your studies and have it checked every six months if still worried. But before I went back to my Masters, I went to a different doctor and was diagnosed with stage II breast cancer.

I felt really terrible. At that time, I planned to study, but I felt I had to cancel everything, my studies, my future, my life. I was only 27 but I thought that my life was going to end. I stayed in Thailand for my treatment which took eight months. I had six rounds of chemotherapy and 19 rounds of radiation therapy. A lot!

But after my treatment I started to do what I loved again. After chemotherapy, for four days I felt I couldn't go outside and was very weak. But then my power came back and I wanted to go out and see people and play with my dog. I wanted to get back to a normal life.

I started up Art for Cancer to start fundraising to help cancer patients in Thailand who can't afford their treatment. When I was having chemotherapy I saw many cancer patients that didn't have money to pay for their treatment so I wanted to use my ability to help them. My Bachelor's degree was in Fine Art from Thailand's best art university and I thought I could use my ability as a channel to help other people, to use art and creativity to fundraise.



Before cancer, I used art to explain my feelings, but now I think art has more value than that. If you can use your ability or creativity to add value to other people, it's more impactful. When I was diagnosed with cancer I wasn't sure how long I was going to live. So I wanted to use the rest of my life and the time that I have to do something good. I wanted to live a worthier life.

We sell t-shirts, hold events and sell artwork to raise money. People donate their art and I sell it online via Facebook. Even if an artist doesn't have money, they donate their artwork to help. The project isn't limited to established artists – the youngest artist who donated their art was five or four years old. He did a drawing on some paper and his parents took a picture and sent it to me, and it sold for 100 Baht! It's very cute. In four years we have raised seven million Baht (US\$201,000), so I am very proud of this.

The woman in my painting represents me. I try to give the message that happiness can lead to a peaceful mind and that everything that happens is just a part of life and happens for a reason. It's nature! Just live with it with a good mind and good spirit. This picture represents that cancer is a part of my life. It's a way of thinking – I believe that whenever something good or bad happens, you learn something.

I accept what happens – now I want to say thank you to cancer as it has changed me a lot. I feel more gratitude in my life. And if I could go back in time and change things and not have cancer, I wouldn't change it as it is a part of me and part of my experience.

I don't think about the future; I think about now, this moment. The present is a gift.

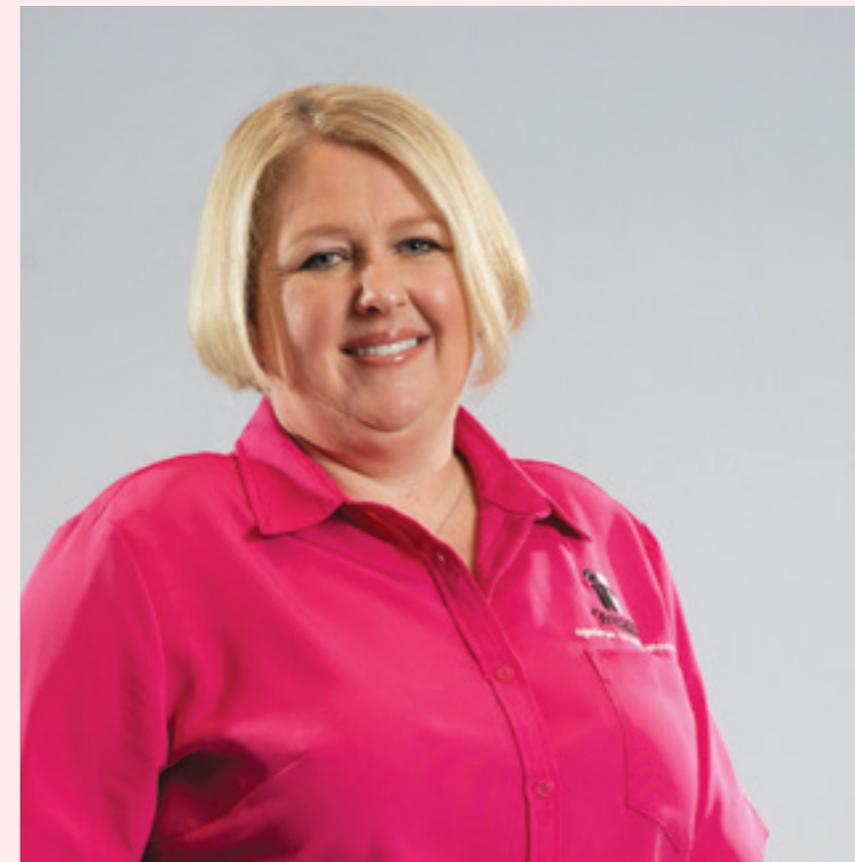


“I feel more gratitude in my life.”

Caring and compassionate: Medical professionals improving their patients' lives

Kerryn Ernst

Kerryn is a Metastatic Breast Care Nurse for the McGrath Foundation, a breast cancer support and education charity in Australia. She is 41 and lives and works in Canberra and is married with two young sons.



We care



“People can live well for a long time.”



Watch Kerry's interview



“Trying to keep people well for as long as we can is the main priority.”

I'm in my seventh year as a McGrath Breast Care nurse for women with metastatic breast cancer. I fell into nursing after school and loved it from day one. I became involved with breast cancer when my aunty was diagnosed. She lived in a country town in South Australia and she had a terrible experience – her treatment team was 600 kilometres away and there wasn't the professional healthcare support that she needed. She was diagnosed and then died within 18 months. I started hearing about the McGrath Foundation, and my aunt was still on my mind so I thought that one day I would work for them.

The McGrath Foundation started in 2005 when Jane McGrath, who was the wife of Australian cricketer Glenn McGrath, was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. She had a breast care nurse and she felt that everyone with her diagnosis should have the same access because she felt it was like she had a best friend, or someone to hold her hands, through the experience. So the McGraths set up the foundation which places breast care nurses around the country, especially in rural settings as there was a gap in services and people there didn't have great access to services or information.



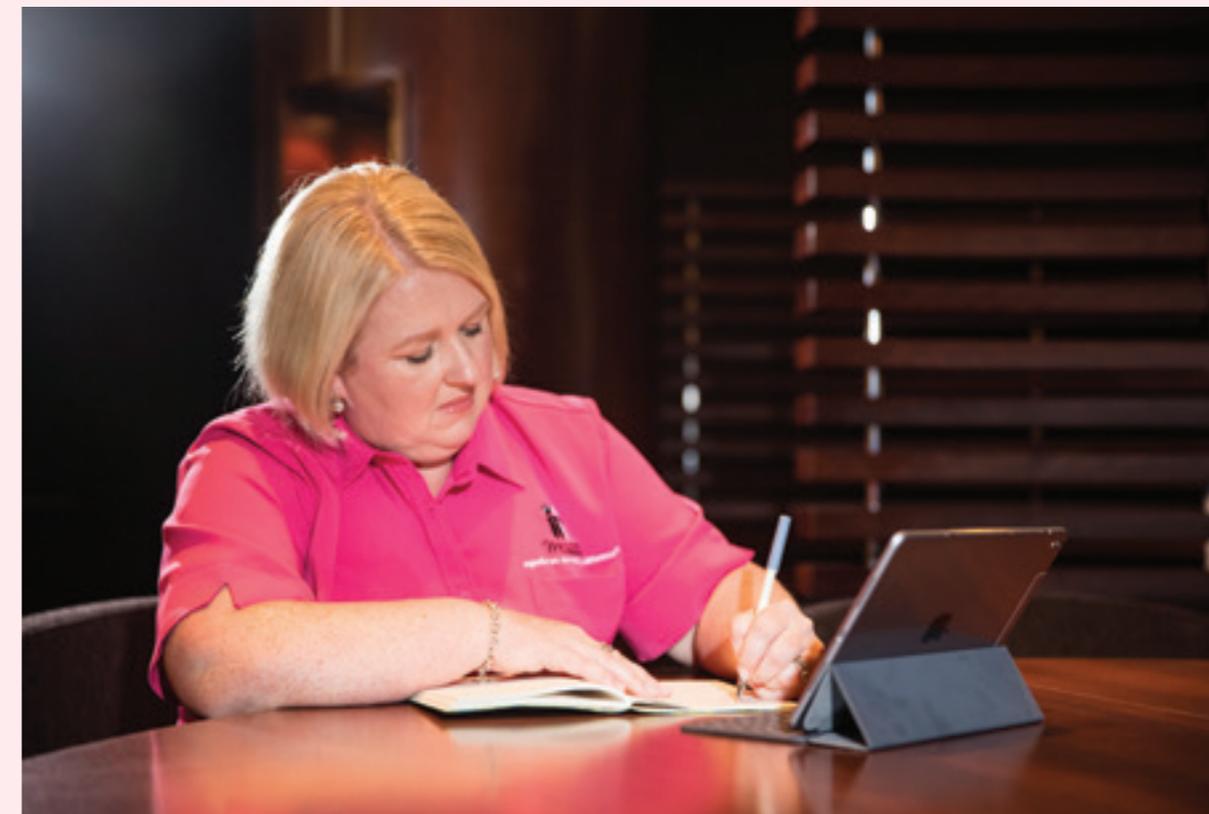
My role came about because we were well-funded with early breast cancer nurses but there was a gap for patients with metastatic breast cancer. There were a lot of new treatments coming up at that time and it was felt that these women needed more support. I am one of 112 breast care nurses at the foundation, and one of five metastatic breast care nurses in the whole country. There are a lot of women out there with metastatic breast cancer and they could do with more support.

I start my day with oncologists in the clinic and I serve as an extra pair of ears in the room. Often when people hear 'cancer' or 'metastatic', their world is rocked and they stop taking anything else in. So later on, if they have questions or don't understand something I can go over it with them. Often my patients' families will want to

meet me as they have a lot of questions. From then on, whatever my patients need, it's my job to organise. So they might need community nursing or palliative care or counselling services, and I will do all that for them. I act as an advocate and a resource for them.

When people are diagnosed I often have to explain to them it is not because they did or didn't do something, it's just sheer bad luck. It's also a shock for them as many people feel well. Many think that's it, they should go home and get their affairs in order and that there's nothing for them, but that is certainly not the case and people can live well for a long time.

I spend a lot of time explaining why we are using the treatments that we do – sometimes it is endocrine therapy, or chemotherapy, sometimes



its radiation. And I explain that this is going to be an experience over many years, and we will jump between all those treatments at some point, but at the moment this is the best treatment for you.

Trying to keep people well for as long as we can is the main priority. We haven't cured metastatic breast cancer but these are mums and wives and daughters and we need to keep them well. A lot of things have changed since I started nursing. We have a lot more treatments and they are getting better – they are more targeted and they

are giving less side-effects, so people are living better for longer. For some, the prognosis has gone up from two or three years to five or six and that's a lot when you have a seven-year-old or a 12-year-old. I am optimistic about the future – I know that there is always work being done on new treatments and there are many coming through the pipeline.

Caring and compassionate: Medical professionals improving their patients' lives

Huang Chiun-Sheng, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H.

Huang Chiun-Sheng has dedicated his more than 20 year career to the prevention and treatment of breast cancer. Dr. Huang is a professor of surgery and director of the breast center at the National Taiwan University Hospital and the National Taiwan University College of Medicine, Taipei, Taiwan. He is also chairman of the Taiwan Breast Cancer Consortium.



We care

“It is getting better and better for patients.”



Watch Dr. Huang's interview



“I encourage all my metastatic patients to look for clinical trials.”

When I started my career, surgery was still the most important treatment, and sometimes the only treatment for most of my patients. Because many were symptomatic – they came to the doctor and were diagnosed – many of them were very frightened and they wanted to take the breast off. So most of the time we did a mastectomy. We had to talk to patients and say you have the option of preserving your breast, but most patients in Taiwan wanted a more radical surgery. Nowadays, many people choose to preserve their breast so it's a tumour excision and the surgery itself has become pretty easy.

The challenge comes from knowing the biology of the disease and how to treat the disease.

Treatment philosophies are changing as we get to know the biology of breast cancer better. Sometimes you need to follow new evidence and be very aggressive in terms of changing treatment plans for your patients. Recently we had two patients who were diagnosed with breast cancer during their pregnancies. One woman was about 30 weeks into her pregnancy. One doctor from outside my hospital suggested that she deliver the baby earlier so that she could receive treatment earlier but then of course her baby would be premature.



of the disease and try to give patients the best treatment and give them the best options.

I spend a lot of time talking with my patients to try and understand what kind of treatment they want because a lot of the time, Chinese patients rely on their doctor and say, you choose for me, especially about surgery. I explain to them the pros and cons but I cannot make the decisions for them. Sometimes a patient will say, if I was your wife, what would you say? I would say I cannot tell you, as during the recent election in Taiwan, I didn't even know which way my wife would vote so I cannot tell you what she would do! We need to provide patients with as much information as possible for them to make their own decisions.

We try to choose treatments which offer better life quality for our patients. The goal for metastatic patients is to keep their life quality and prolong their life. We have more and more effective drugs with very low toxicity so it is getting better and better for patients.

In Taiwan we have very good medical care and so we have many international clinical trials that come here. Patients who take part in clinical trials will gain at least one extra line of promising treatment. In Taiwan many patients think that enrolling in clinical trials is a bit like them being an experimented upon animal, but actually it's not – to get into a clinical trial means that you will have a better quality of care and access very promising treatments, so I encourage all my metastatic patients to look for clinical trials.

But we looked at all the evidence and said that you can safely receive the surgery and also receive chemotherapy during your pregnancy. She didn't need to rush to deliver and have a premature baby.

Another women was diagnosed very early into her pregnancy – she was about nine weeks pregnant. Her doctor asked her whether she wanted to consider giving up the baby so she could receive treatment, but again we talked to the patient and said we can wait until you reach the second trimester and then you can have surgery - you can still deliver the baby as planned. We need to have more aggressive thinking based on current thinking on the biology

Reflections

The inspiring women that have shared their stories may be different ages, from different parts of the world and walks of life, but as they describe their journey with metastatic breast cancer, many similar themes, hopes and deliberations come through loud and clear.



Ai Li

The importance of hope

Ai Li has been living with metastatic breast cancer for nearly 10 years, a prognosis few would have predicted given that the average life expectancy for a woman with metastatic breast cancer is estimated to be three years. Again and again she talked of the importance of hope, as did Catherine, who spoke of how having young children forces her to be positive about all their futures. Both the medical professionals that were interviewed also spoke of their optimism about the future for patients with metastatic breast cancer thanks to new treatments and therapies that are in the pipeline.

Living life to the fullest

Brenda's husband Andrew lovingly described her as a changed person since her diagnosis; now she is much more spontaneous and makes herself and her desires a priority. She talked of the importance of taking control of her life and making time count. Jureerat also highlighted the importance of living life to the fullest, while Ireal decided when she was undergoing chemotherapy for early breast cancer, that she would work to help others facing cancer and set up a fundraising charity.



Brenda and Andrew



Jureerat



Ireal



Yun-He



Hsiao-Feng



Ok-Bun

The value of support

Families, health care professionals and wider communities pay an important role when women face metastatic breast cancer. Yun-He's elderly parents show their support by cooking for her while Ok-Bun's loving relationship with her sons, which is grounded in a love of laughter, gives her strength. While many of the women we interviewed talked of the importance of the understanding and care from their husbands and families as they faced their diagnosis, support can come from a myriad of different sources. Jenny turned to a breast cancer charity; she valued the support and encouragement she gained from them so much that she is now an officer at the organisation, giving others the help she so badly needed. Hsiao-Feng talked of the powerful bond she has developed with her doctor through their decade-long relationship.



Jasmine



Young-Sun



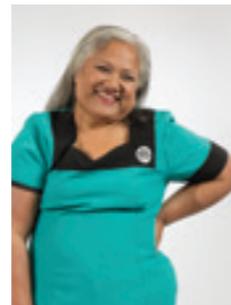
Chia-Jung

Coping strategies and the power of positive thinking

Women cope with metastatic breast cancer just like they cope with many other problems in life – in their own way. When Jasmine was diagnosed, she relied on her mindfulness practice to help her cope with what life has thrown at her. Chia-Jung also found meditation an effective way of helping her accept her diagnosis and finding some peace, while Young-Sun learnt as much about cancer as she could through books.

Confronting misperceptions

Fears and misperceptions often prevent women from seeking screening and treatment services. In addition, cancer has been considered a death sentence in parts of the world; people would rather avoid a test that could prevent it than investigate their status. This is why Loga, a social worker who works with Pacific women, tells her clients about her story. Many Pacific people have traditionally avoided treatment, so she describes herself as living testimony to the great developments there have been with modern treatments.



Loga



Catherine



Jenny

Widening the conversation

Raising public awareness to curb misperceptions and promote understanding is an important part of breast cancer prevention efforts. Both Catherine and Jenny were in their early thirties when diagnosed and both discussed how they thought that only older women developed metastatic breast cancer. By encouraging awareness, younger women may seek treatment earlier and if diagnosed, not feel as alone. Another theme that several women touched upon was the lack of public knowledge surrounding metastatic breast cancer. The overwhelming public story about breast cancer is about the early stages of the disease, so many of the women interviewed hoped that as a society, we can expand the breast cancer conversation to be more inclusive of metastatic breast cancer.





Through My Eyes

A collection of stories for women living with
Metastatic Breast Cancer and their families

Sixteen women, two mBC healthcare professionals and two husbands
reflect on their lives and share their stories:

“I treasure every moment that I have.”

“I’m not going to lie down and say, OK, I’m done.
I’m continuing with my life.”

“I know that even when I am lost, I will be able to find my way.”

“My cancer journey is just a piece of the puzzle of my life.”

“My cancer strengthened my family’s bonds.”



Redefining life with cancer