



“I found my voice”

Singer Lorna Brunelle has always had a powerful voice. When she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer, she discovered a new way to use it—to advocate for herself and other patients. BY BARI NAN COHEN

[TURNING point]

When Lorna Brunelle was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in December 2004, she thought her career as a vocal coach for local Miss America contestants might be over. Although survival rates for early cancers like hers are close to 100%, the treatment—which involves removing the thyroid, a gland at the base of the neck that helps regulate heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature and weight—threatened to destroy her voice. “The laryngeal nerve and thyroid are neighbors in our necks,” says Lorna, 40, who lives in Middleboro, MA. “If the nerve is hit, you can have temporary or permanent vocal damage.”

The first doctor Lorna saw told her that in some cases, patients who have the surgery are unable to talk in a crowded room because they can’t project their voice above a whisper. “He told me to focus more on my cancer and less on my career and quality of life after the surgery,” she says. “I had to ask myself, *How much do I love myself? What’s my worth? Is it worth the risk?* I said, *‘I deserve the best.’*” So she decided to get a second opinion.

Lorna researched treatment options, and she discovered a nerve-monitoring surgical technique that helps reduce the risk of damage to the laryngeal nerve. A plastic surgeon she had contacted about repairing her incision post-surgery recommended Gregory Randolph, MD, a head and neck surgeon at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary in Boston. “He told me that Dr. Randolph would leave my voice and scar in beautiful condition,” recalls Lorna.

The moment of truth

The surgery went well, and Lorna was placed on synthetic thyroid hormone

replacement therapy. Five weeks later, she received radioactive iodine treatment to destroy any remaining cancer cells.

About a month after her surgery, a friend gave Lorna the best recovery gift she could hope for—a chance to sing in public (at the funeral Mass for her grandmother). “I called my surgeon to run it by him,” she recalls. “Much to my surprise, he said I was perfectly fine to sing.”

Still, Lorna wasn’t sure what she could rightfully expect from her voice. “As a backup plan, I called my friend Erica, who is also a singer, and asked her to sing the Mass as a duet in case I had to take a break during the hour-long ser-

vice,” recalls Lorna. “I was petrified that my voice would sound weak, unstable or kick out during a song. In the days leading up to the funeral

I massaged my neck, sang scales and tried to stay hydrated. The morning of the service, I walked into the church filled with self-doubt.” It took only one song to erase that doubt. “After the first song, Erica was coughing, and I completed a song without her,” says Lorna. “My voice sounded pretty. My range was intact, and my gratitude was overflowing. The realization that Dr. Randolph had saved my identity, career and voice occurred in a church. It was in God’s house that I felt a renewed hope for my future in the arts.”

Survival rates for early thyroid cancer are close to 100%

SIGNS OF THYROID CANCER

There were about 48,000 new cases of thyroid cancer in 2011, and the disease is three times more common in women than in men, according to the American Cancer Society. The number of cases has more than doubled since the 1970s, according to the National Cancer Institute. Here are the signs to watch for:

- voice changes
- difficulty swallowing or breathing
- a lump in your neck
- enlarged lymph nodes
- pain in your neck or throat

Helping others find their voice

In 2008, Lorna decided to write a book, *Dirty Bombshell: From Thyroid Cancer Back to Fabulous* (AuthorHouse, 2010), about her experience. Afterward, one of her clients, Katie Boyd, a former Miss Massachusetts contestant, invited her to participate on a reality TV show called *Wicked Fit*, which appears on the Style network. “I lost 47 pounds in 11 weeks! I’m excited to set an example for women who have had thyroid cancer,” she says. Indeed, Lorna’s experience with cancer has empowered her to reach out to others. “I lecture at hospitals and wellness centers about the importance of speaking up for yourself,” she says. “Finding my voice has enabled me to help other women find their own voices.”

LORNA'S LESSONS ON COPING WITH CANCER

These strategies helped Lorna, and they may work for you, too.

• **TELL PEOPLE WHAT YOU NEED.** Lorna is claustrophobic, so she knew she would have difficulty undergoing a full body bone scan, which was prescribed to monitor her treatment. She asked the technician what he could do to make the experience more comfortable, and he agreed to let her enter the machine feet first and without any Velcro straps on her hands and feet. Whether you need a surgeon better suited to your needs—or a sleep aid or anti-anxiety medication—speak up.

• **BE KIND TO YOURSELF.** “If you’re battling an illness, you need to rest,” says Lorna. “I was a manic robot trying to prove to myself and everyone else that I was okay. But what I really needed was a nap!”

• **LET OTHERS CARE FOR YOU.** Before she got sick, Lorna says she was very independent. After her diagnosis, she realized she needed to let people take care of her—especially her husband. “He took over my bills and went grocery shopping,” says Lorna. “I learned to lean on him as a life partner.”

• **SHARE YOUR FEARS.** Lorna was concerned that her friends and family would worry about her and possibly even abandon her during her illness, so she decided to keep her time with them light. Eventually, she realized she needed to let her friends help her cope with her illness. “My friend Rose took me for ocean rides,” she says. “We’d sit in the car with magazines and snacks a few feet from the ocean, and we’d read and talk for hours.”