



Local Woman to Speak at Mass Eye and Ear Infirmary

"The Fifteen Minute Version of the Last Fifteen Months" Lorna Brunelle May 1st, 2006

When my Uncle was diagnosed with pancreatic and liver cancer at the age of 54 he didn't want to talk about it. When my Grandfather was diagnosed with lung cancer at the age of 80, he didn't want to talk about it. When one of my best friends was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 42 she didn't want to talk about it...When I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer at the age of 33, I couldn't *stop* talking about it. I think talking about thyroid cancer is what got me through. Hour after hour, I talked to my family, friends and strangers trying to process *the* six small letters that spell one of the *largest* words in the English language; CANCER. On the days when I was tired of talking or feared the people around me were tired of hearing about it, I wrote. I journaled, emailed and sent notes to myself as a way to purge all of the thoughts from my head.

In October of 2004, my endocrinologist found a lump on the left side of my neck. His finding led to an ultrasound, which led to a needle biopsy or fine needle aspiration. On December 15th, 2004, my doctor called to confirm a positive diagnosis of Papillary Thyroid cancer. Other than watching the Chernobyl Heart documentary on HBO months *before* my diagnosis, I had never even heard of thyroid cancer.

After being numb for about 24 hours following nearly two months of worry over the suspicious nodule in my neck; I went in to a robot like overdrive. I tried to wrap my brain around the word CANCER and how I could make the most out of my situation. "I have to see the positive message in all of this." I kept saying. "This is happening to me for a reason. I have to be a patient patient and try to learn from this."

The first order of business was to explain the word cancer to my nieces and nephews. All they knew was that Uncle Ray had cancer and died. I needed a way to say the word without instilling fear. As we sat around my mother's kitchen table I said, "A part of my body is sick. The part of my body is called my thyroid. For lack of a better prop, I then took a nickel off of the table and said, this is the size of my thyroid....the sickness *in my* thyroid is called cancer. I DO NOT HAVE CANCER, my *thyroid* does. This is NOT like Uncle's Ray's cancer. This is a good cancer." As I said the words, I couldn't believe what was coming out of my mouth. Had I really told the children I had a GOOD CANCER?

From there, I started making jokes about cancer. Cancer humor broke the ice on several occasions during the Holidays that year. We referred to our banter as "Working the C." By poking fun at the word, we squelched its power. I loved hearing laughter mixed in the same sentence with a word whose reputation preceded itself as a death sentence.

My next task was to find a surgeon. Two days before Christmas; I met with a doctor at a big Boston hospital. Ever the planner, I with the help of my E.N.T. and primary care physician, came up with about 10 questions for the surgeon. At the advice of several friends, I brought my husband for moral support

and my mother to take notes. My initial contact with the surgeon was horrific. I felt rushed and unimportant. He opened the floor by telling me *how* routine a thyroidectomy is, equating it with that of a *basic* procedure such as wisdom teeth removal. After about 15 minutes of listening to him downplay thyroid cancer and the surgery I said, "May I ask **you** a few questions?" Outwardly aggravated by my inquiries he barked back responses such as, "Ask your endocrinologist!" or "that is a question for your E.N.T."

As a full scholarship graduate of the Boston Conservatory, professional singer, actor, voice teacher, acting instructor at a top Boston Casting Company, and Miss America system coach; I had career concerns. I was familiar with the possible vocal dangers associated with the surgery and asked if the surgeon planned to use the nerve monitoring system during surgery. I asked if I'd need vocal rehab, what my scar would look like and if I'd need plastic surgery. The surgeon didn't have a tolerance for my inquiries. He fixed his eyes upon me and said, "Miss, I think you need to be MORE CONCERNED about your CANCER and LESS concerned about your career!"

In an instant, I knew he wasn't the one for me. In the parking lot of his office, I vocalized my plans to dump the doctor. Much to my surprise; my husband and mother urged me to stay on course with the surgeon. They wanted me to get the cancer out of my body. It was in that moment that I realized I was going to have to make cancer my own personal experience. I urge everyone out there to follow their own instincts. Please do not let the people around you decide what is best for you.

On a quest to empower myself with knowledge, I contacted a well known plastic surgeon in Boston. Within minutes he was on the phone asking questions about my life, career and goals for the future. "Sweetie, if you have sung at Fenway Park and Gillette Stadium, then Dr. Greg Randolph is the man of you. And by the way you won't even need a plastic surgeon. He is one of the *best*. He swears by the Nerve Monitoring System! I wish you well." While waiting for an appointment at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, I booked time in a recording studio. The first surgeon sent me in to a panic over losing my God given talents. I wanted to preserve my voice just in case something went wrong. It was crucial for me to document that part of me life. My time in the studio was bittersweet as each time I completed a song I wondered if it was the last time I'd ever sing each piece.

Finally the day came when I was to meet my second opinion surgeon. As I walked in to the office, Dr. Greg Randolph greeted my family with a warm hello and friendly smile. In the words of the movie **Jerry McGuire**; he "Had me at hello." I think I actually skipped down the hall after our meeting! For anyone out there wondering how you know when a surgeon is *right* for you...all I can say is, "**You'll know!**" It's the moment when you take a deep breath and all of your fear subsides. You'll feel it in your heart.

For the record, I did email the first surgeon, explaining why I was going to cancel our appointment for surgery. I wanted to set the record straight about my career and life concerns. My vocal goals were not to sing to a sold out stadiums after the surgery, but rather to have the luxury of humming a lullaby to the children my husband and I may decide to have, or sing happy birthday to my grandmother when she turns 80. My voice mattered to me. The scale in which I needed my voice should not have mattered.

I understand that doctors have an obligation to be honest but my first surgeon scared the hell out of me! Patients need to have a level of complete comfort and trust with their doctors. Since I insisted on that level of care, I met Dr. Randolph. Upon diagnosis, I urge you to stick to what is important to you, ask the questions that are piling up in the back of your mind, expect expertise and precision from your surgeon, and smile back when they assure you they are going to do their absolute best to make you well. Have closure in your mind and heart by making sure the critical connection between you and your doctor is the right one. Be true to yourself and know that you have options. You do not have to settle for the first surgeon you meet just because you have cancer.

The next step was to work on ACCEPTING what was happening to me. My friends planned a funeral for my thyroid. Believe it or not, the funeral ended up being one of the most healing aspects of my journey. About 30 of my local loved ones were in attendance to bid farewell to my disgruntled gland. We had a program, music, flowers, gifts, a butterfly theme, and food. I composed the eulogy. As avant-garde as this may seem, I found it very liberating to say goodbye to that part of my body. Ever mindful of the Chinese definition of Ying/Yang, **CRISIS-EQUALS-OPPORTUNITY**, I continued to seek the good out of my situation wondering how having cancer could actually *benefit* my life. Don't get me wrong, there were days when I was wretched when anger. Frustration seemed to overcome my body! **WHY ME** seemed to be the underlining question of every hour. Some days, it was a bit of a struggle not to get wrapped up in self pity.

On Feb 2nd, 2005, my mother, husband and I loaded our things in to the car and headed for Boston. When the surgery was over, I woke up, feeling incredible. Like the butterfly, I felt reborn from a cocoon of cancer. I couldn't wait to spread my wings and fly in my new disease free body. Within a few weeks, I was driving again and weaning off of my Synthroid. In order to prepare the body for the radioactive iodine radiation treatments, you have to become hypothyroid. On the fence about receiving the treatment, I asked my endocrinologist why he was in support of the radioactive iodine. He said, "Lorna, imagine a butterfly shaped sticker on a pane of glass. Now imagine peeling the sticker off. What do you see left on the window? A sticky residue, right? Well, the radioactive iodine is the "Windex" that wipes away the residual cancer cells left in your body that surgeons cannot remove without damaging the voice. By not removing them, you risk a recurrence."

His pep talk was exactly what I needed to convince me to move forward with the treatment. In conjunction with becoming hypothyroid, I was trying to be creative with the low iodine diet. As a person who loves to cook, I enjoyed the challenge of preparing new things. I gathered all of my food at Trader Joes, Whole Foods and the farmers market. I honestly didn't have a problem with menu planning. Please do not get discouraged by that aspect of the treatment. The **thyca web** site has a wonderful low iodine cookbook that you can download for free.

On March 15th, I had a body scan at a Boston hospital my endo was affiliated with. It was my understanding that we were taking before and after pictures to mark the effectiveness of the treatment. I feel compelled to give the heads up to everyone who has issues with small enclosed spaces. I had a **lot of trouble** with the scan. Having only experienced a C.T. scan, I didn't mentally plan for such tight quarters. The technician velcroed my feet and hands to the side of the table, placed a blanket over me and said, "I'll see you in 45 minutes." After seconds in the coffin like position, I knew it would be impossible to remain that way for 5 minutes let alone $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour. I asked the technician to remove the restraints from my body. I made it *very* clear that unless he came up with another way to scan my body, there was *no way* I was getting back on the table.

After a few minutes of contemplation we came up with a method of photography that worked for both of us. The tech agreed to scan without strapping in my body. I agreed to remain perfectly still. He also agreed to take the photos in small segments and granted me the option of walking around between each grouping of pictures. The biggest modification was that he decided to put my feet in first. This prevented my head from being under the canopy for the entire scan. Once he treated me like a person with a pulse rather than a lab rat, I didn't even need to walk around in between scans. Just having my arms and legs unrestrained made all of the difference in the world. Again, it's all about communication, trust, honesty and doing what is BEST FOR YOU. If you tend to lean toward the claustrophobic side, you may want to ask your doctor if a mild sedative is an option before scanning.

On March 17th, I returned to Boston for the radioactive iodine pill. Incidentally, it was St. Patrick's Day. The joke in my family was that I, too, might turn a lovely shade of radioactive green that afternoon! Having been familiar with the precautions associated with the treatment, I should have been prepared

for my emotions that day. I was not. A team of people at the hospital (one of them holding a geygometer) warned me about how important it was to stay in quarantine and follow all of the rules on the instruction from. While they were speaking I read the last sentence of the paper which read, "Please note that you could possibly be identified by law enforcement personnel who are operating radiation detection equipment in the interest of Homeland Security. Keep these instructions with you." I remember thinking "In my 20's I was a bomb shell, and now at 34, I'm a DIRTY BOMB! Guess that makes me a **dirty bomb shell!**"

While pent up in my house for five days, I tried to focus my mind on how fantastic I was going to feel once I resumed my daily Synthroid routine. Being Hypothyroid is a drag! I moved in slow motion for weeks. I was eager to resume my liveliness and get back in to the swing of things. I also found that I was very emotional from the point of my surgery straight through my hypothyroid phase. Prior to my diagnoses, I was never a crier. I was known as the "tough cookie." The more hypo I became the more I resembled a cream puff. I cried over commercials and songs on the radio. Please excuse this behavior and just accept that it's part of the healing process and rebalancing of the hormones in your body.

Since then, my doctor has increased my Synthroid dose three times. This past fall, he added Cytomel to my daily routine. That little **GEM** seemed to restore my energy. I feel more like my old self. I've done labs consistently throughout the past year. I recommend that you are very honest with your endocrinologist if you are feeling sluggish or blue. Call their office and request labs or an appointment. You have to listen to your body.

In November, I rescanned and three weeks ago, I completed Thyrogen injections. I am happy to report that all of my tests came back negative and things look great! For anyone wondering how long it takes to get back to *normal*. I think it's important to give you a brief timeline of some of the things I accomplished after my surgery: Exactly **ONE MONTH** to date after the operation, I sang an entire funeral Mass for my friend's grandmother. **Two months** after my surgery, I flew to Key West with some friends for a vacation. **Three months after my surgery**, I hosted a benefit for 250 people that I began planning the month *before* my surgery and continue organizing throughout my recovery.

I was tired during that time. There were days when I allowed myself to get in to my P.J.'s at 4 o'clock in the afternoon but it wasn't an overwhelming fatigue. It was the type of tiredness that requires energy conservation to make it through the day. Rather than complete all four loads of laundry, I opted to do two loads. **ONE MONTH** after the gala, (**just five months after my surgery**) I began producing a Summer Arts Festival while providing daily hands on care for my grandfather who at the time was dying of lung cancer. In August, (**six months after my surgery**) I sang at my grandfather's funeral- a tribute that *never* would have been possible without the talents of Dr. Randolph. **Weeks later**, I began volunteering with my mother part time on Camp Edwards with the victims of Hurricane Katrina. I did all of this while running and teaching at the performing arts school I own. My point is, there is energy after thyroid cancer. You just have to be patient.

Earlier I spoke a little about how on some days, I got caught up in the **why me**. This past December, at a follow up appointment, Doctor Randolph asked me to speak here today. Since my diagnosis, I have been a local advocate for local thyroid cancer patients. I have been driving them in to Boston for appointments and listening to their fears over lunch at the local diner. I have also been writing my thoughts on thyroid cancer for the past year and hope to someday publish them in to a book. In addition to all of this, I have been passing around my Chernobyl Heart DVD trying to raise awareness of thyroid cancer. Most importantly, I am closer to all of the people I love in my life. I make time for myself by working less and pampering myself more. By forcing us to slow down, cancer has helped my husband and I communicate a lot better. We seem to have discovered a more authentic level of love. By the way, he is growing out his hair to donate to Locks for Love. Cancer taught me how to lean on people and ask for help. Now I am grateful for every day and try to find the good in the worst situations. I

treasure the blessings around me and consider every moment with friends and family a gift. All of this goodness is a result of having the good cancer. I finally comprehend WHY this happened. I walked away from thyroid cancer a better person. That is my wish you. No matter how scared you may be when you hear the word cancer, please remember that you, too, can walk away a **survivor** with clarity and strength.

Thank you.