



## Mother's Day Campaign 2020

Mom was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998 when she was just **39 years old**. I was only six years old at the time, so my understanding of the situation was generally pretty limited. I remember learning that mom was going to need to go to the hospital to have surgery and that the chemotherapy might cause her to lose her hair; I remember going to the hospital with my grandparents to see mom after her surgery; I remember crying while we sat in the waiting room and were unable to go back to see her because she was still recovering from the procedure. Mom responded extremely well to the treatment, and life generally returned to normal for our family.

After mom's initial diagnosis, she was determined to commit her time and energy to **supporting other women** battling breast cancer. Even though she was healthy at this time after her initial surgery and treatment, I think there was a part of her that understood that this was going to be a lifelong battle. In 2001, she began working in the Dan Rudy Cancer Center at St. Thomas Hospital as its cancer program coordinator. In this capacity, she was the founding member of the Cancer Care Advisory Board and created and chaired the "*If I Had a Brick*" fundraiser. She served on the boards of Susan G. Komen® and the Tennessee Breast Cancer Coalition and in later years, was a member of the board of The Women's Fund at The Community Foundation.

In the fall of 2006, we learned that mom's cancer had **metastasized**. At the time, I did not fully understand the implications of that news. A few months later, the harsh reality of **Metastatic Breast Cancer** was explained to me in no uncertain terms – a disease for which there is no known cure...something that will be with my mom forever...that at some point, the cancer will spread so aggressively that mom and her doctors would largely be defenseless. I remember breaking down and crying as the sinking realization hit that at some point, **this cancer was going to take my mom away from our family**.

In December of 2010, while our whole family was in town for Christmas break, we learned that mom's cancer had spread to her brain. Mom had been sick for many years at that point, but there's something about cancer spreading to the brain and impacting cognitive functioning that is especially traumatic. She had three tumors in her brain, one of which was the size of a golf ball. Her team of doctors started her on a two-month treatment program at which point they would re-evaluate the activity in her brain and bones but were skeptical that she'd respond favorably. **Those two months were difficult beyond measure**. It's as if there's this uncertainty hanging over your head that you are thinking about every moment of the day and for which you desperately want clarity but have no way to accelerate the process. I was not able to see her every day, and for the first time since she was diagnosed 12 years earlier, she seemed sick. I began to understand that there was a very real possibility that this could be it given how aggressively the cancer was now spreading.

In March, I was walking back from my Economics class and got a call from my mom. She and my dad had just left her appointment to assess how she was responding to her treatment. Two of the cancerous spots in her brain had been effectively eliminated, and one had shrunk to a negligible mass. I'll never forget the extent of relief that I felt in that moment.

What began then is what I like to call the **"extra time"** that our family got. I call it "extra time" because it was certainly plausible that the cancer spreading to her brain could have caused a swift deterioration and taken my mom from us at that time. **There's never a "right" time to lose someone from cancer**, but that time would have been especially difficult – my sister was still up in New Jersey for her final semester of college, and the rest of us back in Nashville were not yet prepared for that given how healthy she had been for all those years and how well she had always responded to the various treatments and drugs. Right after we got the news that everything in Mom's brain was clear, she began feeling so much better, and things truly went back to normal. **The next six months were filled with such happiness and joy, and there were so many special memories our family shared during that time.** Our whole family was together in Nashville that summer, and it was such a wonderful gift. My mom got to see my sister graduate from Princeton and begin medical school at Vanderbilt. Our family got to spend one last 4<sup>th</sup> of July at the lake in Alabama and got to take one last trip to the beach in Florida. My mom and dad had such a fun date night at the U2 concert at Vanderbilt Stadium. My mom got to see all of her Vanderbilt friends one last time at her 30<sup>th</sup> reunion. My mom and I got to have one last lunch date at The Pub at Vanderbilt, and my mom got to take my brother John on one last climbing trip.

In September, mom's cancer spread to her liver and her lungs. Mom began an intense treatment regimen, but the doctors were pretty concerned with what they were seeing. The cancer continued to spread rapidly and by November, her team of doctors acknowledged that **there was effectively nothing more they could do to slow the spread.** Mom was incredibly sick those last few months, both because of the spread of the cancer and because of the strength of the drugs she was taking. She was suffering from a tremendous amount of physical pain and cognitive impairment – she was struggling to walk and had times where she had difficulty communicating. Despite the difficulty in seeing my mom in such pain, **there were still beautiful moments we shared in those final weeks.**

It's been more than eight years now since we lost my mom, and I miss her like crazy. I miss her beautiful smile and seeing the way she loved and cared for others; I miss sharing the highs and lows of life with her and celebrating the special moments with her and with our whole family; **I miss her guidance, her encouragement and her love.**

My mom and dad spent 34 years together and loved each other dearly. They had a wonderful marriage and loved being parents together. When I read the obituary that my dad wrote, I could not help but smile because he captured who she was in such a beautiful way. He wrote,

***"Beth loved being a mother and found great joy in raising her three children. Beth lived each day with grace, strength and an unshakeable belief that life was beautiful. Her capacity for love was immense, and her kindness touched many. Her presence will be missed dearly, but her spirit, her love and her service to this community will forever be a testament to the tremendous life Beth lived."***

I wish more than anything that we had **more time** with mom. I am so thankful, though, for each of the 20 years that I did get to spend with mom and the “extra time” that our family got to spend together in the Spring and Summer of 2011.

**Rob Higham**, son of a Breast Cancer Fighter