



Barbara Brabec's World

It's All About *LIFE*, Folks!

~ BarbaraBrabecProductions.com ~

BREAST CANCER: What Women Need to Know

Barbara Brabec's Personal Experience

– First published in 1993, last updated in 2021 –

**This article could
change your life.**

Here, cancer survivors and friends of Barbara share timeless stories of how they survived breast cancer. Two of them wrote books about their experiences, and I greatly admire both of these women:

Leila Peltosaari has been successfully publishing her own books for 35 years, many of them best-sellers aimed at kids. Visit TikkaBooks.com for info on all of them, including *Dancing With Fear—Tips and Wisdom from Breast Cancer Survivors*, which was quickly hailed as "a major contribution to the literature on cancer." It includes Leila's journey with brief glimpses into the breast cancer journey of 125 survivors, all celebrating good years and even decades of survival.

In the summer of 1993, breast cancer sneaked up on me when I wasn't looking.

I WAS STILL PUBLISHING my home-business print newsletter at that time, so I naturally wrote about how this disease affected my business activities. Needless to say, I lost many hours for six weeks of that summer to doctor visits, medical testing, surgery, recovery time, and daily radiation treatments for the lumpectomy I'd had. But I was one of the lucky ones. My cancer was caught early and I was more than a little relieved when I passed the five-year mark with no recurrence of the disease. (*I was told that the five-year survival rate is 92 percent if the cancer has not spread.*)

Because I was so involved in work at the time, it was easy to put my cancer experience out of my mind once I'd recovered from the radiation treatments. As the months and years passed, the only time I thought about it at all was when I had to get my quarterly blood tests and annual mammogram. I knew I had totally put the experience out of my mind the day I found myself sitting in the doctor's office that summer in 1993 waiting for him to come in and suddenly realized I didn't remember which breast had been partially removed.

Of course I had thought about breast cancer from time to

During the writing and self-publishing of this book in 2005, Leila went through one life-threatening health crisis after another, nearly dying more than once. She is currently dealing with MS and is wheelchair-bound with a danger of becoming permanently paralyzed, yet she continues to be enthusiastic about her work.

In 2019 as she was about to release her latest book for writers and self-publishers, she said, "I plan to market my new book, *Sell Your Words*, so successfully that I can continue staying home and avoid nursing homes." My admiration for Leila's talent and optimistic spirit is endless.

Lois Hjelmstad is the author of *Fine Black Lines: Reflections on Facing Cancer, Fear, and Loneliness*. Once I started this book, I couldn't put it down. Through journal entries, poetry, reflective essays, and pictures, this beautifully written book captures the fear, anger, loneliness and courage of one woman in facing those challenges. Many doctors and nurses have praised this book.

In December 2018, Lois published *Abidance: A Memoir of Love and Inevitability*. She says, "It's the story of the challenges Les and I faced as we entered the parallel universe of the Old-Old. And how we managed to stay crazy-in-love through it all. Younger people write books about us Old-Olds, but this is how it really is."

time when I remembered the friends of mine who had breast cancer and considered all the other women at risk for this disease. Because some women today are not giving breast cancer the attention it deserves, I thought it would be helpful to reprint the story of my experience, initially shared only with my print newsletter subscribers.

Life's Little Interruptions

AT MY DOCTOR'S recommendation, I started getting annual mammograms when I turned 50. But I skipped my 1992 mammogram because I was so busy working on my home business. Finally, after sending the Summer 1993 issue off to the printer, I took time to get my long-overdue mammogram.

That morning as I left the hospital's Breast Center, I recall thinking that it was really stupid of me to delay this important annual test because it had taken less than an hour of my time. *If it turns out that you have cancer, and it has been growing all this time, you might not live to regret your stupidity*, I thought.

When the doctor called to tell me there were "suspicious cells" that required a biopsy, I accepted the news with surprising calmness—partly, I think, because my intuition had already given me this signal, and partly because I had been reading the literature on breast cancer for years and figured my luck could run out any day. *I learned then that one in nine women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime and three-quarters of all breast cancers occur in women over 50*. So instead of thinking, "Why me?" when I got the news, one of my first thoughts was that I was in good company. I'll bet many of you have been this route already, are currently facing the problem, or have a friend, sister, or mother with the disease. The somber fact is that every woman is at risk. *Breast cancer is the most common cancer in America*.

Unfortunately, many doctors are apparently forgetting to remind women over 50 to get an annual mammogram, and the bad press mammograms have received in the past have convinced other women not to bother with them. I'm glad to be in a position where I can influence women to give this topic the attention it demands. A mammogram caught my cancer in its earliest stage. *This simple x-ray not only saved me from having to deal with cancer in an advanced stage, but gave me better odds for a longer life*. While it's true that a mammogram won't catch all breast

In 2002, Lois wrote and published *The Last Violet: Mourning My Mother, Moving Beyond Regret*, followed, in 2010, by *This Path We Share: Reflecting on 60 Years of Marriage*. All of her books are available on Amazon. Her website is LoisHjelmstad.com.

The night before her first mastectomy, Lois had wept as she wrote the poem, "Goodbye Beloved Breast." She did not know, of course, that the poem would lead to an award-winning book, *Fine Black Lines*, or that the book would lead to a national and international speaking career with more than 600 talks—in all 50 United States, England, and Canada—and to three other award-winning books.

Lois was widowed in 2020 after nearly 72 years of marriage. She's the mother of four, grandmother of twelve, great-grandmother of eight, and great-great-grandmother of one. An amazing woman! My thanks to her for allowing me to publish two poems from *Fine Black Lines* at the end of this report.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

[American Cancer Society Breast Cancer Screening Guidelines](#)

1-800-227-2345

[The National Cancer Institute](#)

1-800-422-6237

["U.S. Breast Cancer Statistics" \(2020\)](#)

cancers, it often spots cancerous cells long before a lump can be felt.

A Matter of Attitude

MY SURGEON, who was apparently used to dealing with women who cry a lot when they learn they have breast cancer, was surprised when I came to his office alone to discuss the X-ray findings and didn't get emotional when he said cancer cells had been found. I said that, as a self-employed individual, my immediate concern was not for the salvation of my breast, but of my business schedule.

"Give me the straight scoop," I said. "Is this cancer likely to kill me?" **No.** "Can I delay surgery for two weeks to attend to some critical business matters?" **Yes.** "How soon after surgery can I get back to work?" **As soon as you feel like it.** "Will the removal of the lymph nodes restrict my arm or hand movement?" **No.** "Will the follow-up radiation treatments make me too ill to do the speaking engagements I've scheduled for October?" **No.** "Will chemotherapy be necessary?" **Too early to tell.**

As it turned out, I didn't need chemotherapy—only an anti-estrogen pill to help prevent the cancer from recurring—so I was spared the agony of having to lose my hair. (I had visions of delivering my home-business humor speeches that fall either half-bald or in an ill-fitting wig, which unsettled me far more than the thought of losing a breast.)

When the surgeon asked if I wanted to get a second opinion, I countered with the question, "Have you done a lot of breast cancer surgeries?" **Yes.** "Good," I said, "because I don't want someone who is still practicing." It took a minute, but he finally decided this was a joke, and I got a real laugh from him the day I pointed out an error on the special instructions list he was then giving to his surgery patients. It advised me to wear a "brazier" for at least a week after surgery. (Of course he meant "brassiere.")

With the good news that all the cancer cells had been removed during my lumpectomy and none were present either in the lymph nodes or bones, I found it easy to adopt an "attitude of gratitude." I was especially grateful that my insurance coverage limited out-of-pocket expenses to \$3500 because the total cost to remove a few cancer cells was \$31,216, with radiation treatments eating

up \$17,000 alone. I also felt lucky to have found this problem in mid-year so the bulk of my expenses were confined to one calendar year and that year's insurance deductible figure.

Another thing I was grateful for was how modern technology had taken radiation treatments out of the stone age. Now, radiation can be directed to pinpoint spots, so the damage to good tissue is minute. In fact, my skin never even turned red after six weeks of treatment. The only down side to the radiation treatments was that they made me tired. The technician told me that radiation eats up a lot of energy because the body has to replace all the white cells that are being destroyed along with the cancer cells. For a long time after the treatments stopped, I tired more easily and needed more sleep. This passed in due time, however, and before long I was back to normal.

Turning Crisis to Opportunity

AT THE TIME I HAD MY SURGERY, I read somewhere that, in the Chinese language, the characters for “crisis” and “opportunity” are the same. I decided to look upon my brush with cancer as a wake-up call from God—a reminder that I was not going to live forever. I am grateful to have had this experience because it gave me an opportunity to get my life priorities straight and be helpful to other women.

One of my goals in sharing my cancer experience is to remind my readers that while a home business is important, one's health must come first or there will be no business at all. After I wrote about this topic in my newsletter, I received many calls and letters that told me that my words had jolted many to immediate action.

“Your earnest speaking out did some good,” wrote Colleen. “I, too, have been putting off a mammogram until I had more time, but I called today right after reading your newsletter.”

Marilyn, who was 1-1/2 years overdue for a mammogram to check a suspicious shadow that had showed up earlier, reported that my words prompted her to make an immediate appointment too. The good news was that the shadow was gone. “I'm sure I've been carrying around some low-level stress about this for the last year and a half,” she said, “so I wanted to write and thank you, not only for the nudge for myself, but for what you've given countless others who read your article.”

Susan said my story was “a sobering reminder to all of us that we have to listen closely to that voice inside.” Ernie wrote to tell me that one of his daughters was undergoing the same treatment. “Your missive will serve as an inspiration to encourage her in her fight,” he wrote.

Support from Your Business Family

WHEN I COULD NOT manufacture enough energy or hours to publish my fall newsletter, I did the only professional thing I could do at the time: explain the

situation in a personal letter to my subscribers. If emotional well being helps in the healing process, the many cards and letters I received were terrific medicine indeed. Each time I got another positive message from one of my subscribers, I felt re-energized and doubly grateful to have such a wonderful business family for support.

In wishing me a speedy recovery, Maryn made an important point: *One advantage of having a homebased business is having a personal touch with your customers. In times of crisis that same customer becomes an ally and is very understanding.*

Remember this in case you ever find yourself in a situation where you simply can't do it all for one reason or another. Some people respond to crisis by ignoring the problem, but my mail proved how understanding business associates can be when you're in trouble.

Your Attitude Does Make a Difference

IT WAS COMFORTING TO HEAR encouraging words from cancer survivors such as Gini, who said that 31 years ago doctors told her she would die of cancer in six months. "This gets your attention," she wrote. Radiation treatments in those days were not as refined as they are now, and Gini still has a bright red square on her skin where the radiation burned her. But she's got a great attitude, and she made me laugh when she wrote, "Better red than dead!"

I agreed with Ernie who said, "I have long believed that the proper mindset can be 90 percent of the body's ability to fight off any intrusions."

Although I took my cancer experience in stride, I learned in talking to the director of the cancer center where I got my radiation treatments that my response to these procedures was unusual. I was told that many of the women then undergoing radiation treatments with me either were fighting depression or just too embarrassed by the disease to speak about it to anyone. The director wanted to know my secret, and I told her it was a matter of attitude and that I had an edge because I'm a self-employed individual with many things to think about other than myself.

It also helped to have a husband like Harry who always helped me find something to laugh about in the worst of situations and would have loved me just as much if I had no breasts at all. Although I was perfectly capable of driving myself to the cancer center every weekday to get my radiation treatments, Harry insisted on driving me there himself every day for six weeks. When I asked him why he was doing this, he said, "Because it's my job as a husband to be supportive of you in any way I can." I wished then and now that all women with breast cancer could have this kind of emotional support.

What surprised me was that so many of my readers thought it was brave of me to tell my story. *I'm not brave at all; I'm just a writer who writes about what she knows and a teacher who has learned that the best lessons are those taught by example.* As Darla pointed out, "When someone in the public eye can admit to being real, it somehow makes it easier for the average Jane Doe to let herself feel her

feelings and be real as well.”

Darla has had more tragedy in her life than she would want described here. Suffice it to say that she’s a survivor who operates on faith. “Everyone has a different story to tell,” she says, “but no one gets through life without experiencing surprises, heartache, or illness. We must go on, like it or not. Going on with a positive, upbeat attitude is one of choice, but one that makes all the difference in the world. Life is precious and it is our duty to make the most of what we have in any given moment. I believe there is always a silver lining behind clouds of gray.”

The Therapeutic Value of Writing about Your Journey

LONG BEFORE I WAS a professional writer, I was pouring out my emotions and viewpoints in diaries, journals, and letters to my family and friends. The older I get, the more I find myself expressing my feelings in writing, and it’s very satisfying to know that I have at least a small audience of readers who appreciate what I have to say. For my thoughts on writing as therapy and how this helped me get through the grieving process after losing Harry, see my article series for widows, now a PDF document titled “A Widow’s Thoughts and Advice” and “Writing as Therapy to Ease Grief and Loss.” It doesn’t matter what life issue you’re dealing with; journaling about it can help a lot.

As one who writes not only for personal satisfaction but money, I find it interesting that so many people who begin with the idea of helping themselves through writing end up helping others and making money too. Writers derive great pleasure in writing, but their greatest satisfaction comes from knowing that their writing has meaning to others.

A friend’s comments brought tears to my eyes. “You are here for a purpose,” said Joanne. “I believe the purpose is far greater than just providing information for entrepreneurs. You have a marvelous gift for understanding people and, as Robert Schuller says, you turn ‘scars into stars.’ You bring people courage and support and we do appreciate it.”

The greatest human need is to feel loved and appreciated. As people helped me during my cancer experience—and my widow’s journey as well—I hope you’ll always keep an eye out for others who need *your* understanding, encouragement, or message of love. It’s the greatest gift you can give.

The Government's Latest Breast Cancer Guidelines

SOME WOMEN MAY SUSPECT they have breast cancer but are so frightened of the word “cancer” that they refuse to confront it. Each day this disease kills many women who might have been saved by regular breast exams or mammograms, so I offer this report of my positive experience with this disease in hopes that it will prompt more women to action. An annual mammogram is inexpensive, an appointment will steal less than an hour of your time, and it could save your life. But some women are getting bad advice about when to get their first mammogram.

In my 2012 update to this article I reported on how shocked I was by the November 2009 announcement from a “government Task Force” advising that women should ignore the warning they issued earlier about the importance of regular mammography screening and self-examinations after the age of forty, and should now hold off on getting annual mammograms until they were fifty. And, oh yeah, they added, don’t bother with self-examinations because these “could lead to false positives which might prompt unnecessary treatment.”

Hmmm . . . if you had to weigh the stress of a false positive and a follow-up medical test against NOT finding a lump that, left untreated, would lead to cancer that could KILL you, which would you choose? Of course, if you die from breast cancer that has not been discovered early enough, you certainly won’t have any more stress.

As a breast cancer survivor for many years, I figure I’m here today because my annual mammogram revealed the early stages of breast cancer that was easily treated by surgery and radiation. I have no record now of when I started getting mammograms; I’m just glad I started when I did and got them every year after that. The good news after that 2009 announcement was that the Department of Human Health and Services (HHS) and the American Cancer Society had decided to stick with their recommendations that all women over 40 should get annual mammograms and continue to do self-examinations. The breast screening policy would “remain unchanged,” said HHS.

But guess what? A couple of years later women were being advised on the Harvard Women’s Health Watch site to start getting mammograms after age 45. This recommendation came from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (now the most influential group that provides preventive care guidelines for doctors). In searching for the latest statistics then, I learned that one in five women get breast cancer before 50. How scary is *that* statistic?

So what was really going on here with these back-and-forth changes? The new guidelines about waiting until you were fifty to get a mammogram had come from a task force appointed by President Obama, and it was made up of 16 doctors and scientists who were “on board” with “Obamacare.” I believed then and now that their goal was simply to help the government figure out how to deliver health care at the lowest costs possible under the new health reform bill, and when that bill passed, only God knew what was actually in it. (As Nancy Pelosi said—and surely lived to regret—“We have to pass the bill to see what’s in it.”)

MY 2019 PERSPECTIVE: This new bill was expected to dump about 40 million more Americans into the health care system, and there was considerable testimony from the medical community that there simply wouldn’t be enough doctors to take care of all of these people. So I believe the government was “planning ahead” with its new recommendations for breast cancer screenings by trying to reeducate American women to these new “health guidelines,” which would eliminate millions of mammogram screenings and follow-up tests. I also believe that, under “Obamacare,” this was supposed to be just the first step of many that would gradually force (or prevent) everyone not yet on Medicare to stop seeking medical advice for things they routinely used to do, like getting annual blood tests to check cholesterol and glucose readings to make sure they weren’t heading for heart

problems or diabetes. And that's probably when they started to discourage men from getting PSA tests to learn if they had prostate cancer because, after all, this is a slow-growing cancer and something else would probably kill them before the cancer got too bad.

AARRGGHH! All I can think of now is that famous quip, "Hi, we're from the government, and we're here to help you." God help us all.

2020 Postscript: Revisit the American Cancer Society (Cancer.org) for the latest recommendations. When I last checked in April 2021, there was information about how Covid-19 affected mammogram screenings in 2020, and I see they are now saying women between 40-44 have the option to start screening with a mammogram every year. For older women, see recommendations on the site.

All I can add is that my surgeon and oncologist insisted that I have annual mammograms as long as I live, because my cancer came back in 2013 after twenty years (see article link below). While on the Cancer Society's website, check the statistics for women getting cancer after the age of 55 and then decide if you want to go to biannual mammograms or not.

Consider that I got breast cancer in the summer of 1993, right after I'd just turned 56. I didn't document the first year I got a mammogram, but I will forever be grateful to having a good doctor who told me I needed to do this every year from that point on.

Originally published in 1993 on BarbaraBrabec.com; updated several times.
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RELATED ARTICLES:

I didn't want to detract readers by linking to other articles I've written that relate to this one, but you can easily find them by checking the category indicated below in my [ARTICLES Table of Contents](#) page.

Breast Cancer Returns after Twenty Years. This special PDF document is an addendum to this article, prompted by the return of my breast cancer in 2013 after twenty years that eventually necessitated a mastectomy. (Mind & Body articles)

A Widow's Thoughts and Advice: An Uplifting Series of Articles for Widows and Other Grieving Heart (PDF). (Barbara-Personal articles)

Writing as Therapy to Ease Grief and Loss. It's not always easy to voice your deepest feelings to another person, but you don't have to be a writer to put them on paper or open your tablet or word processor and let the words pour out. (Writing & Publishing articles)

Bonus Feature: Excerpts from Fine Black Lines

I Wish I Had My Teddy Bear

I wish I had my teddy bear—
I could pretend that I am five
clinging to my mother's dress
knowing my father could do anything
hearing fairy tales that ended
"and they all lived . . . "

I wish I had my teddy bear—
I could pretend that I am thirty
toddlers clinging to my dress
believing their father could do anything
reading fairy tales that ended
"and they all lived. . ."

I wish I had the teddy bear
my husband gave me years ago—
the day our last child left the nest
even though neither of us quite understood
why I wanted one

If I had my teddy bear—
a little friend who listens well
something to cling to in the night
Perhaps I would not feel so alone . . .

On Dying

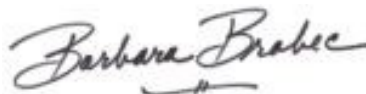
There are two things that bother me
I can't take my teddy bear with me
and
I don't know
if there will be one
where I am going

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Your feedback to this writing is invited.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO comment on this report or share your own experience with me, I would love to hear from you. [Email me here.](#) If you have a message you'd like me to include in another article or share in an upcoming blog post, be sure to include your phone number when you write, along with your time zone. I'd like to have the opportunity to call you if I want to continue the discussion.

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BARBARA LAUNCHED BarbaraBrabec.com in 2000 and quickly began to populate it with home-business articles and resources. Over the years she added hundreds of articles on several other topics related in one way or another to the larger topic of LIFE.

Now, LIFE itself is Barbara's focus. Unlike her original website, her new domain launched in 2021 features only her own writing—new content and an archive of timeless and relevant articles in fourteen life-related categories, all updated and reformatted for republication on the all-new "Barbara Brabec's World." It reflects Barbara's current writing interests, latest books, and professional services.

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