

Don't Let Cancer Break Your Funny Bone

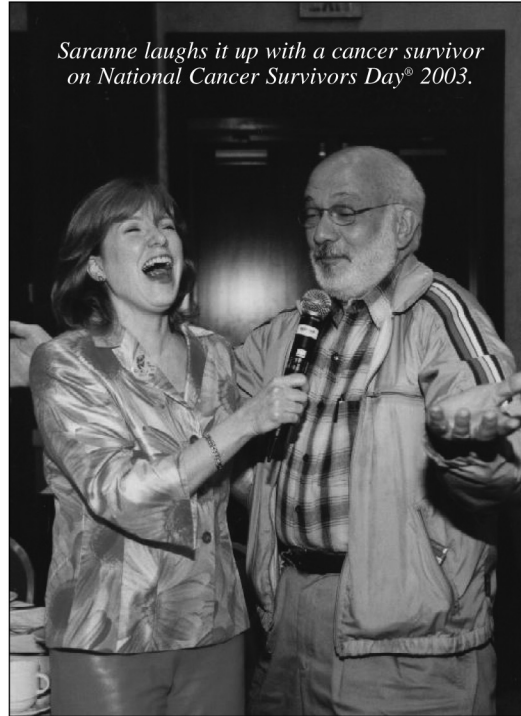
by Saranne Rothberg

I fractured my funny bone in February 1999. I heard “malignant tumor, surgery, radiation, chemo” and felt as if I’d forgotten how to breathe. The medical staff continued to banter about the prognosis of my exposed breasts when suddenly my mind rebelled. An old magazine article about a man who had “laughed himself well” hijacked my thoughts.

I admit it may have been a slightly hysterical reaction when I yanked off my hospital gown and ran from the Englewood Breast Center to the local video store in search of comedy tapes. But the diagnosing doctor had just informed me that it was too late on Friday to assemble their hospital cancer squad. At that moment, the weekend seemed like an emotional Grand Canyon of fear, anxiety and depression. If laughing helped Norman Cousins beat his rare nerve disease two decades ago then why couldn’t I bemuse my cancer for 60 hours? What did I have to lose?

Armed with stacks of stand-up comedy performances and feature films, I returned home still reeling from the logistics of fighting cancer. I wooed my five-year-old daughter to her bed earlier than usual. I was barely holding back an eroding dam of tears as we said prayers. Torturous questions bombarded my mind, “How

delivered the punch line, and the audience’s laughter filled my room. I demanded that my mind listen to Eddie even though it was more interested in my self-chatter about my own mortality.



Saranne laughs it up with a cancer survivor on National Cancer Survivors Day® 2003.

Another Murphy joke, I laughed and blew my nose. Another joke, I laughed and cried. Another joke, more laughter rang from deep inside. I could still laugh! I realized the cancer was ravaging my healthy breast

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many more bedtime stories will I read to her?” “Will I be strong enough to bathe her after chemo starts?”

Sobbing, I ran to the television in another room and fumbled to insert the first videotape. Could the comedy cavalry rescue me the way Norman Cousins had documented in his article? I sat in front of the monitor praying for a miracle.

A young Eddie Murphy appeared on the screen. He set up his first joke,

tissue but it hadn’t robbed me of my ability to laugh.

I switched to a Jackie Mason video. With each laugh came a deeper breath. With each deeper breath came relaxation. With relaxation came a sense of calm. I was now laughing multiple times per minute and life seemed normal again.

As the East Coast went to sleep, Robin Williams’ relentless antics caused me to laugh without pause.

His comedic momentum jiggled all those stomach knots caused by the cancer diagnosis.

Next, my cancerous left breast and I are laughing at Jerry Seinfeld’s “Lost Socks in the Dryer” monologue.

Throwing my head forward in laughter again, I slapped my knees in agreement; I lose half a pair every time I do laundry, too. And then it hit me. I am not alone. Millions of people are on this cancer journey with me. We’re supposed to connect.

Like everyone else diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, I was stressed. But “stressed” is just “desserts” if you look at it backwards. Norman Cousins and the myriad of comics taught me a crash course in comic perspective, turning stress and disease on its head. Their honesty instilled in me a sense of hope and the ability to invite humor, laughter and light into the most sour, darkest night of my life.

It’s been almost five years, three surgeries, 44 radiation treatments and too many chemo cocktails since my all-night comedy marathon. I am now considered cancer-free. And at least twice a day I surround myself with comedy as a tribute to Norman Cousins and all the comics who have given me my life’s mission at the ComedyCures Foundation. From its grassroots launch during my first chemo treatment, it became clear that I was in the hot seat to bring joy and humor to others through this non-profit service. And the punch line is: my funny bone healed.

Editor’s Note: Saranne Rothberg is the executive director of the ComedyCures Foundation. For information about Saranne’s comedy programs visit www.comedycures.org, e-mail info@comedycures.org, or call Saranne at (201) 227-8410. ■