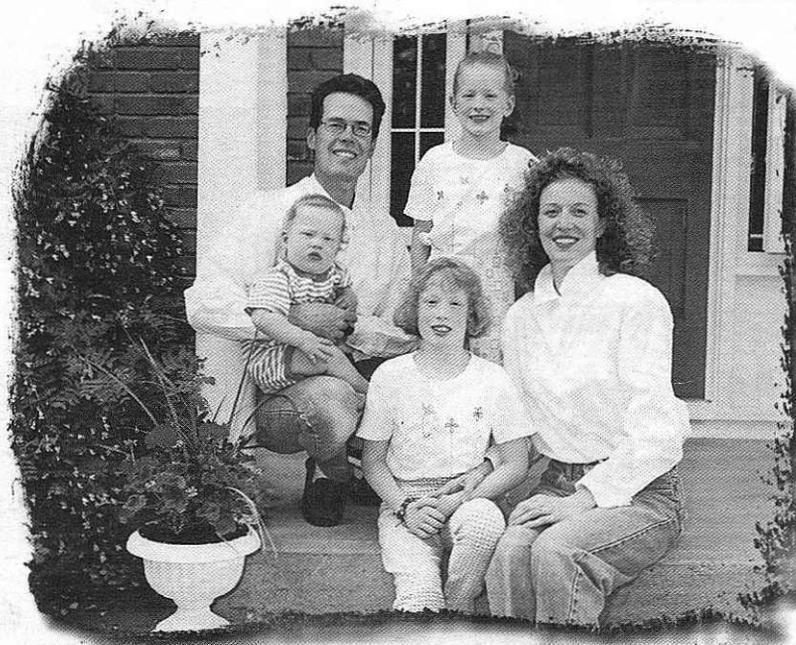


# Passage to Gratitude

A Woman's  
Breast Cancer Journey

*Pat Fream*



It was early in June 1997, and precisely on schedule, millions of perfect lilac buds clustered on branches, preparing to spring to life. It was a regular day – mild and unremarkable, or so it appeared to the rest of the world. But for Wendy Downe, this was the day she would go to war. The phone rang and after a simple, four-word sentence, the world as she knew it, instantaneously exploded.

“You have breast cancer.”

She had found the lumps herself, two years earlier when she was 35 years old and two months pregnant with her third child. Her doctor had sent her to a surgeon, and there she heard exactly what she wanted to hear... “Don’t worry, you’re okay, it’s just hormonal changes related to pregnancy.” She went on to give birth to her beautiful son Quinn, whom she lovingly breast fed for his first year of life. One year later, the lumps were still there, but even as she had them removed for biopsy, the surgeon optimistically told her he was 99 percent sure the tissue was benign.

He was wrong.

At 37, Wendy Downe, wife, mother, lawyer, neighbour... was newly classified – sick... with cancer. At first she cried – for three solid hours. And then, in the middle of the suffocating agony, she stopped crying and began fighting for her life.

In the weeks that followed the lilacs blossomed, and Wendy Downe had a double mastectomy. Her breasts, once life sustaining for three tiny infants, were now diseased – she wanted them gone. Her husband supported her every excruciating step of the way; together with their children he helped her brush her teeth, put on socks, and dress the 68 staples that littered her chest. Her children were one, five and eight years old. The five of them were at war.

The chemotherapy and radiation that followed stripped Wendy of her energy, her appetite, and the curly, crimson hair she had once claimed as part of her identity. She surrendered her vanity, but not her spirit. This disease picked the wrong person to mess with.

Ironically, according to research, she was all wrong for the disease. She was under 50; she had begun having children before the age of 30, she had breast fed each of her three children for a year; as a young girl, she was late starting her menses; and most perplexing, there was no history of breast cancer in her family. In short, she

did not fit the profile of a high-risk candidate for breast cancer. There was no explanation. No one to blame.

As she began to heal, Wendy heard of a group of Breast Cancer Survivors in Vancouver who formed a rowing team and competed in dragon boat races. The concept was born out of a research project whereby a physiotherapist and an oncologist in Vancouver set out to refute the theory that women who had endured breast cancer surgery could never again participate in repetitive arm exercises. The women rowers disproved the claim. They were in the business of beating the odds.

Inspired by this story, Wendy helped champion a Calgary team of dragon boat racers. The team called 'Sistership' embodied 24 women, ages 36 to 71. The sisters, bound by the common grace of defying death, pooled their fortitude and rowed their way to first place in their category at the 1998 Alberta Women's novice event held at the Glenmore Reservoir. The team members wore purple headbands inscribed with the Chinese symbol for courage. They were victors, not victims.

In October of the same year, Wendy was the spokeswoman for the CIBC Run for the Cure. The annual event raised \$300,000 locally and more than 4 million dollars across Canada, for breast cancer research. When the run was over, Wendy shared her story with hundreds of people. She found it therapeutic to talk about it – offer others some nuggets of wisdom she had gleaned from her cancer journey.

Today, as the leaves turn colour, Wendy is well, and slowly rebuilding her life. She is back brushing her teeth, driving a car and even practicing law, part-time. But in a million ways, her life has changed. Her values have changed. Her body bears the battle scars. And she has learned some tough lessons which she is compelled to pass along...

\* *Be the keeper of your own body, and in doing so, take charge of your health. Doctors are just human beings doing their best at the job they are trained to do. They can't know, understand, predict or be responsible for what happens to your body. If you feel there's something wrong with you, do what it takes to uncover the problem. If you find a lump growing where it shouldn't be, stop at nothing to have it removed.*

\* *If you have been diagnosed with breast cancer, take measures that are right for you. A double mastectomy may not be your choice, or the right option for your situation. Learn your options, listen to advice, and then make your own choice.*

\* *Treasure your days... your weeks, months, years. When you turn 40 – be elated! You did it! You are here! When you turn 50, be ecstatic... What a privilege! You are blessed! Every day is truly a precious gift. Be grateful!*

For Wendy Downe, cancer has been a humble passage to pure, unbridled gratitude. At 40, she lives in a world that is rich with appreciation, and full of extraordinary experiences, vivid colours, and fierce love. She is here... Hurrah! Here to witness the shrill screams of a disgruntled three-year-old... here to take a walk on a sunny afternoon... here to savour the smell of the spring lilacs.

*Editor's Note: On Sunday, October 3, thousands of people will gather at Mount Royal College to run, walk, weep and bring hope to those who know the brutal devastation of breast cancer. All of the money raised from the CIBC Run for the Cure, will go to breast cancer research. If you wish to participate you can pick up an entry form at The Running Room, CIBC, or IGA stores. If you cannot participate, please support a runner or call the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation at 234-0438 to make a donation.*

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