

Rising to the challenge of breast cancer



Susie Alexander (in her screenprinting shirt!) with one of the many mottos that she applies to her life since being diagnosed with breast cancer and having a double mastectomy before the age of 50.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] A [/dropcap] little more than a year ago, **Susie Alexander** received the news that nobody wants to hear: the lump she had found in her right breast was malignant.

"I had a shower and I never really look at myself in the mirror, but this time I noticed a puckering on the right side of my breast. I felt around and felt a lump and thought, 'oh

no'. It made me feel quite nauseated, because, well..." Susie, from Warrnambool, said, her voice trailing away.

It was to be the beginning of a journey that, like only cancer can, turned Susie's life completely upside down.

Susie, 49, was a nurse for 28 years and is married to paediatrician **Dr Greg Pallas**, so she wasted no time in having the lump tested the same day as she found it. That was a Friday, her step-daughter's birthday, and the distraction of a party sleepover made the agonising wait for results over the weekend a little easier to bear.

A strong history of cancer on the matriarchal side of the family – her mother, Jan, died of lymphatic cancer last December – meant that Susie was highly conscious of the risk, but previous lumps detected in mammograms had proven to be harmless.

By the Tuesday, however, the result was confirmed as cancer and three days later Susie had the breast removed, together with 32 nodes under her armpit because of concern that they might also be cancerous.

"You have no time to think. I turned into a robot and I think I was a robot for 12 months thereafter because between Mum and myself, you just have to get on with it," she said.



Susie at home in Warrnambool: "You can't afford to not live your life now. I try to live in the now and so that is how I survive."

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] A [/dropcap] layer-by-layer inspection of the removed breast brought more devastating news.

"(My doctor) came in and gave us the results: I not only had one cancer, but two cancers in that breast. Ductal and lobular. The lobular...was in 11 different areas of my breast, but it hadn't shown up on the scans at all, because it is so minute," Susie said.

"I was hysterical, I have never cried so much, because even though (the cancer) wasn't in the nodes, I was not guaranteed of anything anymore."

Given the insidious nature of Susie's particular cancer, she made the seemingly radical decision to have her remaining breast off, even though scans had not shown any sign of disease.

“For me, it was an easy decision. Knowing what had happened with the lobular, there was no doubt I was going to have the left breast off. I just had this feeling about it that said ‘get that breast off,’” she said.

The left breast was removed last October and post-operative tests revealed ductal cancer in situ: cancer cells that are contained, but which can become invasive.

While a double mastectomy before the age of 50 is a psychological and physical mountain in itself, it has been the reconstructive surgery since that has been an equally demanding challenge.



Susie with older sister Lynne Wormald at the start of last year's fundraising walk in December: she intends to repeat the walk again this year.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] S [[/dropcap]usie blames nobody, but feels the decision to have reconstructive surgery was “rushed” and, in hindsight, she wishes she had taken more time to recover emotionally and physically from the mastectomies.

Not only is the pre-implant process quite painful, where an expander is fitted into the chest muscle and gradually filled with a saline solution, but Susie has no sensation in or around the implants.

Worse, she has had life-threatening sepsis three times as a result of the reconstructions and been hospitalised for up to a fortnight each time. A year on, Susie still requires surgery to fix the complications.

Yet here she is, alive, laughing, making art, and doing what she can to raise awareness and funds for breast cancer research and support. Just like last year, Susie will again lead a fundraising walk along the Warrnambool foreshore in early December.

“It is good for me, because as a survivor of cancer I want to be able to do something to help other women. I want to be able to help.”

Given her vitality, it is a shock to hear Susie say late in our interview that she has “a sixth sense” that her cancer will return.

It does not depress her, however, but makes her more appreciative of each day of wellness.

“You can’t afford to not live your life now. I try to live in the now and so that is how I survive. I don’t look into the future too much, or the past either, just the now.”

[box] **Bluestone Magazine** will provide updates on Susie’s foreshore walk planned for December to raise funds for the [Breast Cancer Network Australia](#). You can read our story on [last year’s event here](#). To find out more about the Warrnambool Social Breast Cancer Support Group contact Ann at annkrause56@gmail.com or phone 0400 800 499. [/box]

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