

Courageous Style

BAZAAR contributor Ann Caruso was newly in love and at the top of her field when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Here, she recalls her hardest—and most triumphant—year.
By Jenna Gabriel Gallagher

"At Memorial Sloan-Kettering," Ann Caruso says of the New York City hospital where she had her mastectomy and began breast reconstruction, "they give you this letter for when you go through airport security because you may *ring*."

As a stylist, Caruso is used to traveling with suspicious-seeming carry-ons (she brings a prop kit including things like a staple gun and fishing wire to every shoot), but nothing made her as nervous as the first time she faced the possibility of explaining the metal in the tissue expander that was slowly stretching her skin in preparation for a saline breast implant in front of a whole queue of impatient travelers.

Successfully clearing the TSA has been just one in a long list of stresses Caruso—who, at 42, resembles one of her all-time favorite fashion icons, the young Ali MacGraw—has faced since her breast-cancer diagnosis last December. "My boyfriend had felt a lump," she explains quietly in a matter-of-fact tone that suggests she's been over it all in her head a million times before. Like so many of the one in eight American women who will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime, Caruso wanted to believe there was nothing wrong.

"But it didn't go away, and it kept getting larger. Then it started to hurt."

More than six months later, sipping tea at New York's Four Seasons Hotel, she still seems a little stunned recalling the devastating results of her biopsy. "I was like, Oh, my God, I can't believe I have cancer." She spent the rest of the week reeling. Help came from her friend and client Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York. "When I learned that Ann was ill, I jumped into action, calling any cancer specialists I knew and networking from there for the very top experts," the duchess recalls. "Of course, time is of the essence when the diagnosis is cancer, and thankfully my campaign of phone calls quickly connected the dots in ways that got Ann the very best treatment."

Caruso was fortunate for the fast action because she soon learned that she would

lose her right breast. "I was heartbroken when I thought I was going to have a lumpectomy. Then I found out I was going to have to have a mastectomy," she says. "The first time I looked at myself afterward was in the hospital. They gave me a handheld mirror to look, and I started to cry. I couldn't believe this was me."

Gratitude and acceptance soon replaced sorrow when she learned that the surgery had been a complete success. As she began speaking with other patients, Caruso also realized just how fortunate she was for her strong support network. "It's such an emotional moment in your life, and a lot of people can't handle it. I talked to one woman whose husband divorced her after her mastectomy. He couldn't deal with it."

Caruso, who had been dating her boyfriend for only a few months before he >



Chic and strong: Donna Karan New York dress, Melody Rodgers pendant necklace, Diane von Furstenberg by H. Stern bracelet, Disk necklace, Caruso's own. See Where to Buy for details.

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found the lump, credits him and the other important people in her life—as well as her faith—with helping her cope. “My higher power carried me when I couldn’t carry myself,” she says emphatically. “And my friends and family were crucial to my recovery. They were my dream team.”

Even though Caruso was now cancer free, her life was far from back to normal. She was able to avoid chemotherapy in favor of tamoxifen (an oral drug, with generally milder side effects, that she will take for the next five years), but she still faced three more surgeries to reconstruct her

injury. “I looked on all different Web sites that had mastectomy bras, and it seems like they think that women who have had mastectomies and breast cancer don’t care about the way that they look. The fabrics are insane. You don’t want to put them on your body; they are so uncomfortable. After you’ve had surgery like that, you want to feel feminine, you want to look a little bit sexy, and there’s nothing out there.”

While she eventually settled on a Gap sports bra that she pronounces “really great... and comfy,” Caruso doesn’t plan to stop there. Her final surgery is this fall,

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chest. Among other things, she’s had to find a new way to dress. “It’s a nightmare because [during the reconstruction process] you have one breast that’s bigger than the other,” she says, pantomiming on her chic but modestly cut summer dress. “You’re always lopsided because you have one that’s your real breast and one that’s slowly getting bigger.”

Caruso traded in her strappy little shifts for pieces that were higher at the neck and had sleeves. She relegated frilly Yves Saint Laurent blouses to the back of the closet in favor of discreet button-ups, and she invested in one-shoulder pieces that downplayed the unevenness of her breasts. That left the problem of bras.

“After a mastectomy, your arms are so weak, you can’t really lift them up that far. You can’t reach your back. So you wear a bra that has Velcro in the front,” Caruso explains, tugging at imaginary bra straps to demonstrate. “You have to wear that for six to eight weeks. And then you can go into a kind of regular bra, but something that’s a little lower at the bottom because it’s more comfortable that way.”

Given her profession, Caruso found the available support options added insult to

and she’s already been in contact with several bra manufacturers about finding ways to create better options for women who don’t want to sacrifice style while undergoing breast-cancer treatment.

She’s also been thinking about a line of bathing suits that would offer more coverage and sun protection for women battling the disease. (In fact, the week she spoke to *Bazaar*, Caruso was being fitted by swimwear designer Malia Mills for a suit for her first postcancer holiday.)

Caruso’s strength inspired her friend Melody Rodgers, the jewelry designer, to create a necklace. “She found an Athena, the goddess warrior, fourth-century coin from Greece and made it into a pendant in pink gold and gave it to me as a gift,” she says. Rodgers plans to market the piece and donate 20 percent of the proceeds to the Comprehensive Breast Center at St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital, where Caruso says she found the doctor “who is making me feel whole again.”

“I will always note that I have another title now as a cancer survivor. But it won’t be something I’ll be thinking about every day.” She pauses, then flashes a smile. “And sometimes I even forget that I am now.” ■

BEATING BREAST CANCER

PREVENTION

Stay slim. While a diet high in fruits, vegetables, and plant-based proteins and low in animal fats and proteins is generally advised, Debbie Saslow, director of breast and gynecologic cancer for the American Cancer Society, says, “Stick to a diet that will help you maintain or lose weight.”

Drink in moderation. “Limit intake to no more than one alcoholic drink per day,” Saslow advises.

Know your family history. “Some high-risk women are eligible for treatment with tamoxifen, a drug that can cut risk in half,” says breast-cancer surgeon Elisa Port. “In only the most extreme cases, some women can elect to have a preventive bilateral mastectomy.”

DETECTION

Start breast self-exams. “If you do it every day for six months, soon you’ll know what’s normal for you, and if something new pops up, it will be readily recognized,” says Port.

Schedule a mammogram. It’s still the gold standard. If you’re over 40, go annually. If there’s breast cancer in your family, Port recommends starting 10 years before the age of a first-degree relative’s diagnosis but no later than 40.

Consider genetic testing. Some women with strong family histories can take blood tests to check for BRCA1 and BRCA2 gene mutations, an indication of an up to 80 percent chance of developing breast cancer.

TREATMENT

Surgery. For some early-stage patients, surgery alone suffices, without chemotherapy or radiation.

Radiation. Thanks to new technology, says Saslow, some patients are able to undergo more intense treatments for a shorter time.

Chemotherapy. Many patients need chemotherapy, but advances have resulted in more effective drugs that are more easily tolerated. **Sari Botton**

For more information, visit breastcancer.org, cancer.org, or cancer.gov.