A Breast Cancer Diary: Angela Baker

Angela “Jersi” Baker, 48, of Charlotte, North Carolina, has found a new life as a model promoting metastatic breast cancer awareness and helping underserved women.

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September 2003

At age 32, I saw my general doctor for my annual checkup. As she examined my left breast, she grew concerned and referred me for my first mammogram. I went a week later and had a biopsy the same day—my mom was with me. That night, the doctor called to tell me I had Stage 0 breast cancer, aka ductal carcinoma in situ. I was a single mom to an 11-year-old boy, Jakai, and had a full-time job as a shipping manager.

My doctor was extremely optimistic; the cancer hadn’t spread, and, with treatment, I’d probably never have to face this disease again. Tests showed that it was HER2 negative and estrogen receptor positive. I sought opinions from two breast surgeons, opting for a unilateral mastectomy along with immediate reconstruction. I had surgery on October 14, my mother’s birthday. Afterward, I took tamoxifen for five years, to keep the cancer from recurring.

October 2008

No more tamoxifen! I celebrated five years cancer-free with coworkers, who surprised me with a cake with purple icing, the color of cancer awareness.

Summer 2010

A small, flesh-colored bump appeared on the surface of my left breast. It wasn’t irritated or discolored. Just a pimple, I thought. I waited for my routine follow-up with my breast surgeon a few months later. She measured it and took pictures, then said, “I want to remove it.” The nodule was cancerous, still Stage 0, and she assured me she’d gotten it all—no chemo or radiation needed.

November 2011

A nagging cold with weird whistling noises sent me to urgent care, where they took an X-ray for suspected bronchitis. But they called me the next day to say it showed an abnormality. When my mom and I visited my oncologist, he had a sad look on his face as he uttered the worst: “Your cancer has returned, and it’s Stage IV metastatic breast cancer.” The cancer had spread to my

chest wall, spine and head. There was no cure. I would need to be on some treatment for the rest of my life, and my life expectancy was five years. The doctor outlined his plan of action: Faslodex (fulvestrant), an estrogen receptor downregulator, plus 24 rounds of radiation. We needed to start immediately. I continued to work and tried to keep life as normal as possible.

February 2013

I felt like I was emotionally crumbling. I took time off work to focus on me, but I didn't want to stay at home and be depressed. My uncle didn't have a driver's license and asked me to help him get around. I was happy to help. I even handed out cards and gave rides to people for a small fee.

September 2013

A woman with breast cancer contacted me. She needed help getting to appointments but didn't have money. "That's OK," I said. We spent five hours together, visiting three different doctors. We talked; we prayed. A few weeks later, when she called back, it hit me: This is what I'm supposed to do. That eventually led to my nonprofit, Angel in Disguise, Inc, which provides free transportation to underserved and uninsured people with cancer in Charlotte, North Carolina. We drive them to and from doctor appointments and treatment and medicine pickup and run light errands.

May 2015

I modeled for AnaOno, a lingerie company for women affected by breast cancer, started by a survivor.

Jersi BakerCourtesy of Jersi Baker/Jakai Baker

August 2016

On stage again! This time, I was invited to join the cast of My 2nd Act: Survivor Stories from the Stage, sharing our rebirth in a live stage show.

October 2016

After years of deliberation, I had my breast implant removed. It was often painful and always itchy, and I disliked the fact that while my right breast was showing natural signs of aging, my implant remained high.

February 2017

I walked in my first New York Fashion Week, in the AnaOno x #Cancerland show, wearing red lingerie. On the catwalk were other survivors and previvors (women at high risk for breast cancer)—none of us were models, just everyday women.

April 2017

More projects to raise awareness! I had my body painted for an underwater photo shoot.

February 2018

I participated in the Grace project, in which 800 women were photographed revealing our mastectomy scars and living in our power.

September 2018

Angel in Disguise’s car, a red Pathfinder SUV, died. We’re using my personal car but searching for Go Fund Me help to buy a new or used SUV.

Jersi BakerCourtesy of Jersi Baker/Jakai Baker

Today

My treatment plan includes Faslodex shots every month; Xgeva (denosumab) shots every month to help with bone strength; and an oral medication called Ibrance (palbociclib), which I take for 21 days at a time.

I really dislike when people tell me, “Keep up the fight.” I’m not in a fight; I am winning. Every day I wake up, I am winning. I may look happy, smiling and shining, but the fear that cancer will consume me is real. Still, my life is extraordinarily full. Jakai is now 27. Having this disease forces me to live life to its fullest, every day. Life is for living. I want to make the impossible possible.

Breast cancer is classified according to the kind of receptors it expresses. A majority of breast tumors carry estrogen receptors (ER positive). Others express another receptor called HER2 (human epidermal growth factor receptor 2). Triple-negative breast cancer doesn’t express any of these receptors and is harder to treat.

Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS): This noninvasive type of breast cancer originates in the milk ducts and can become invasive cancer.

Metastatic breast cancer: Also called Stage IV, this breast cancer has spread to other parts of the body, often the lungs, brain or bones.

Tamoxifen: This selective estrogen receptor modulator is often used after

hormone-receptor-positive breast cancer surgery, to reduce the risk of recurrence.

For more on metastatic breast cancer, click here.

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