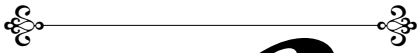


REAL-LIFE READ

Stefanie LaRue has used her harrowing experience to raise awareness about young women and breast cancer



A

t just 30, the last thing on Stefanie LaRue's mind was

breast cancer. Here, she tells us how she was misdiagnosed three times and why, after nearly five years of battling the disease, she's adamant that all women should be aware that breast cancer can strike at any time – despite their age.

➤ **“As the doctor explained how I had stage-four metastatic (advanced) breast cancer and gave me one year to live, my world fell apart. I was just 30 – how was this even possible?”**

My boyfriend at the time found the lump. We'd been out and enjoyed a night of cocktails and dancing, then went back to my place. Our clothes quickly ended up on the floor, but the mood went from steamy to serious once he felt something in my right breast. ‘Have you felt that, Stefanie?’ he said, looking concerned. He was referring to a pea-sized lump in my right breast – something which I hadn't even noticed, until now. Of course that

Stefanie at the Revlon Run/Walk for Women event with Jessica Alba.



“I was
misdiagnosed
with breast cancer

killed any type of 'moment' between us, and as the weekend progressed I started to worry about what it could be.

I couldn't get an appointment straight away, so I had to wait until the Friday of the next week to see a doctor. He reassured me that it was nothing but a breast infection. At my age, and having no family history of the disease, he told me breast cancer wasn't even a possibility. I wasn't so sure. As my breasts became more painful over the next 10 days, and I started to suffer from hot flushes, I went for a second opinion. This time I was referred to a cancer surgeon – but again he sent me home feeling stupid that I had even considered breast cancer.

I still felt uneasy so I went back to the same cancer surgeon and pleaded for an ultrasound. A large, inflamed mass was identified. He showed me my X-rays and explained that though the mass was large at 4.6 centimetres, he still believed it was just a breast infection. This was the third time I was misdiagnosed.

Finally, a month after my boyfriend had found the lump, I pushed for an incisional biopsy, where my cells would be tested for any signs of cancer. Even before this, the surgeon reassured me that it wouldn't be breast cancer. He was wrong. Two days later I was called in to see my doctor – but I hadn't prepared myself for what he was about to say.

When the words 'cancer' left his mouth I went into shock – my immediate thoughts were of death. My doctor's voice became distant while my mind raced about how little time I had to live. Then I realised I had to let my family know. I remained composed until I heard Mum's voice. Hearing her despair as my doctor told her how I had one year to live caused me to explode into a stream of tears. She cried out, too – her heart was broken. I felt numb.

I knew I had to tell my boyfriend, too. Taking a deep breath, I phoned him and asked him to meet me at my apartment. He knew. He could hear it in my voice.

Back at my apartment I broke down. I'd always thought breast cancer was something that only affected older women. I had never even heard of someone my age getting breast cancer. The more I thought about what I was told, the harder I cried. My stomach was turned inside out. When my boyfriend arrived he held me tight, and we cried together for what seemed like an eternity.

By the time I embarked on my chemotherapy treatments a week later, the lump measured eight centimetres. I endured six painful months of chemo with some intolerable side effects, such as constant nausea, vomiting, lack of appetite and diarrhoea.

After the chemo I felt so strongly about raising awareness of breast cancer that I spent my 31st birthday participating at a Young Survival Coalition conference. That weekend I met other young women my age who were living with breast cancer. In a sense I was relieved – I had felt so lost and alone after my diagnosis.

When the chemo finished, two surgeries followed in May and June, 2006. When I removed the bandages after the second operation, I was left with only a nipple on my right side. My breast surgeon had scraped all the way down to the chest wall, removing all the breast tissue possible. I had what is termed a partial mastectomy followed by lots of physical therapy and radiation therapy treatments. Friends and family were so supportive through this time. And while my boyfriend and I parted



Raising awareness with her organisation, SLAM.



Stefanie endured six months of chemo.



Bravely preparing for a scan.

“THE SURGEON REASSURED ME IT WASN'T CANCER. HE WAS WRONG”

ways in that first year, he still remains a very close friend of mine.

As the one-year mark passed since my diagnosis, I felt lucky to be alive and felt stronger than ever about raising awareness. In 2007 I attended the Revlon Run/Walk for Women, in aid of breast cancer, with celebs such as Jessica Alba. ▶

three times”



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Since then, I have supported many other breast cancer charities and been a keynote speaker at various events.

Friends and family also helped me start up SLAM (Stefanie LaRue Advocacy Movement). Our aim is to educate young women in their teens, twenties and thirties, warning them that they too could be at risk of developing breast cancer even if it's not in their family history. We teach the importance of how and why it is so critical for young women to be their own advocate.

Nearly five years after my diagnosis, I'm living proof that breast cancer doesn't mean a death sentence. I'm still receiving radiation therapy and my doctors haven't given me a time frame – I could have 10 years left or a few months – but I'm glad I've been able to raise awareness of breast cancer in young people. If I can save at least one person's life, then I've done my job." **Sarah Finley** □

HOW YOU CAN HELP

On May 9, the Mother's Day Classic fun run and walk, a fundraiser for breast cancer research, will be held nationally. To register go to mothersdayclassic.com.au.

Make a donation to the McGrath Foundation, co-founded by Glenn and Jane McGrath (who passed away in 2008), and help raise funds for breast care nurses (registered nurses who act as patient advocates). Go to mcgrathfoundation.com.au.

Purchase pink-themed products (a percentage of profits go to charity) at nbcf.org.au.



Stefanie is still receiving radiation therapy treatment today.

Self-exams CAN SAVE LIVES

In one year in Australia, about 14,000 women are expected to be diagnosed with breast cancer. Six per cent of them will be aged under 40, according to the National Breast Cancer Foundation, the leading organisation in Australia raising money for research into the prevention, detection and treatment of breast cancer. Early detection is the best way to reduce deaths from breast cancer.

Check yourself

If you're aware of how your breasts normally look and feel, you're likely to notice a change if it develops. In addition to seeing your GP for a breast check every year, do regular checks at home. A good time to check is on the last day of your menstrual cycle (when any premenstrual pain and lumpiness has settled), or on the same date each month.

CHECK YOUR BREASTS BY:

1. Looking at the shape and appearance of your breast and nipples in the mirror with your hands by your sides.
2. Raising your arms above your head and looking for a change in the shape of your breasts.
3. Feeling for lumps in your breasts either while lying down or standing.
4. Feeling for lumps in your nipple area and in the armpits.

LOOK OUT FOR:

- A lump or lumpiness, or even a change in appearance, such as dimpling, redness and appearance of veins.
- Any pain in your breast.
- Any change in the shape or appearance of your nipple, such as your nipple being pulled in or development of a rash.
- A discharge from your nipple, particularly if it is bloody.

WHAT IF I NOTICE SOMETHING:

Don't panic. Most changes are not related to breast cancer. However, if you do find a change or a lump, visit your GP immediately as early detection has been proven to save lives.*