

My Million Dollar Boobs Led to a Million Words

WORDS BY
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I checked into the hospital December 20, 2007, and was met with a zillion questions. Didn't the hospital administrators know me by now since the July 2007 bilateral breast cancer diagnosis? It took hours to get through their administrative reporting simply to check-in while stressed to the max waiting to lose my breasts. It must have been my seventh time returning since the initial bilateral lumpectomy followed by radiation, along with other diagnostic surgical procedures I'd had.

You see, I knew the drill far too well. I watched them place the IVs in my arm with gown on, catheterized, no panties on, and surgery anticipated to be a four-hour procedure. I was ready to spread my wings on the hospital gurney. Then, a notification: my top docs were running late. Okay, just what the doctor ordered – more time for nerves to build up when all I really needed was a cup of java. Up at the crack of dawn (don't they know a Starbucks gal needs coffee this early). A neighbor (physician's spouse) popped in to amuse me and kill some time, but that was short-lived.

I was on pins and needles waiting, marked up like a jigsaw puzzle from neck to abdomen with a black Sharpie pen. My sweat was making the surgical lines smear all over my body; under the gown I looked like a strange board game. I was flushed and worried. Then, the kiss of death – four top docs walked in to deliver some bad news – it was written all over their faces. Oh no, did the big C travel throughout my body before they could get it all out? Perhaps they didn't have proper staff to do surgery that day? Equipment failure? My mind was racing all over the place for a few nanoseconds - wandering, wondering. You could tell the nurses felt terrible too. *Will someone please tell me what is going on here? Did someone die?* My breast surgeon, plastic surgeon, anesthesiologist and the chairman (also my ENT surgeon) popped in to relay the news. The suspense was killing me! *Please guys – what's up?! Dish it out!*

They explained in grave detail: "Yes, someone died. The woman who orders breast implants died yesterday. We're looking through her files to find the FedEx tracking number to locate them as they should have been here by now. They're insured for a million dollars per set (that's \$2million!). She orders all implants and prosthetics for this hospital."

"Okay, I understand but what does that have to do with me?"

"We apparently did not keep good records, and if we don't have your implants we cannot begin the procedure."

"You mean you don't have extras stocked on a shelf?" I proclaimed in shock and dismay.

"We cannot open you up and do the reconstructive breast surgery without implants in-house. The good news is we have a tracer on the situation with FedEx."

Oh yes, FedEx to the rescue. My new million-dollar boobs are lost in the mail! What's a hardworking cancer patient to do? "I've waited a few months for this day," I ranted. They said, "Each patient receives two sets because they are so expensive, only one extra set, or spare, is on hand in case something happens during the surgery along with the first pair. They are not kept on a bookshelf nor in our surgical inventory with other medical supplies."

I was still in shock and now having heart palpitations. They waited until the last minute to inform me. I was catheterized, being administered drugs which relax me prior to surgery for hours, not the ones that put you out on the way to the operating room, so at least I was still lucid enough to read them the riot act.

They went on to explain their options since the anesthesiologist had other commitments that day. Seriously? Now I'm being put on the back burner? They said if the surgery did not begin by two pm, it would be rescheduled in two weeks. Two weeks! Simply ridiculous! Please find some breast implants, and let's try to make this surgery happen today. I had made the arrangements with my employer and staff, coordinated things at home for child care, and needed to have this surgery completed over the Christmas holiday. Please do what you can to make this happen.

I just could not believe my eyes and ears. Two hours later they returned, no FedEx in hand. My million-dollar boobs were officially lost in the mail, like a check. I was in disbelief. They took my catheter and IV out and said, get dressed, you're going home. I asked if they would continue their search to find new implants, but I wasn't too hopeful and so very disappointed.

Although this entire situation was not comical, I called my boss and a few friends about my new boobs being lost in the mail and had a few laughs. Then, I got dressed and went to breakfast at a local diner and enjoyed that. I thought, this could only happen to me. I went back to work for the rest of the day. Yes, this is what working women do best: stay focused, keep busy even during crisis and trying times. After all, I still had the lopsided real boobs post-bilateral lumpectomies. They originally removed golf-ball-size tissue for salt and pepper spec-sized tumors (Stage 0 and 1 DCIS) and then my bra straps would fall down and blouses would shift during business meetings. So humiliating.

Lo and behold, the very next day, they found two sets of replacement implants, and I headed back to the hospital to be prepped again. One set came from a patient reserve, the other from another hospital. While the hospital figured things out, I started all over again. They filled in the jigsaw puzzle, added new markings with the Sharpie pen, prepped the IVs and catheter for my bilateral, skin-sparing mastectomy followed by reconstructive surgery to take place on December 21, 2007. I dreamed of becoming a million-dollar babe, or two-million-dollar babe, when I awoke, but my crazy journey was just beginning.

While recovering at home, I planned an expensive home renovation to our master bath and kitchen – what's a recovering cancer patient (working woman) to do but keep busy even during times like these, right?! I found this to be healthy for my mind, body and soul wellness. While emptying those ugly drains and tubes, wearing those ugly utilitarian bras that woke the neighbors every time I unlatched the Velcro, I got inspired at home.

First, I researched women with million-dollar boobs and learned J-Lo's legs were insured for a million dollars each. Comically, I thought, perhaps, it was time I got a bigger life insurance policy out on me, since my new rack was oh-so-valuable. I had a few good laughs to myself and wrote this all off, as simple as that. There was nothing I could do to change the circumstances of losing my breasts, but, honestly, I wondered, why do those implants cost so much? As I later learned, because I was one of the first clinical trial patients in the state

of New Jersey undergoing "gummy bear" reconstructive breast surgery, all of this was happening pre-FDA approval, which accounts for the high costs and low inventory.

My recovery continued for four long years with ongoing complications, and the bills piled up. You see, the breast surgeon left me with my chest cracked open on the OR table for over eight hours while waiting for the plastic surgeon to arrive. I contracted MRSA – a flesh-eating bacterial infectious disease that typically causes immediate death. After I escaped that with a 10-day hospital ward stay and strong drugs, I contracted Breast Cellulitis 3X – a lesser form of MRSA but still quite painful and serious. I had additional implant complications over the next 18 months, one after the other – four bilateral implant replacements in total. My rack was becoming so sore and valuable that I felt like an \$8 million dollar babe having had four sets by now. Was my chest rich? Because my pocketbook said otherwise.

The medical and surgical costs were exceeding a million dollars. When I saw those astounding bills pile in, I was so grateful for my healthcare insurance, but the out-of-pocket costs were quite high. I never planned for any of this financially, and it set me back in a big way. There are usually not positive outcomes with cancer + money. All you can do is hope for the best and realize that if you were made whole, in some shape and form, and are healthy, try to find the silver lining. I did that and called myself the Bionic Woman with Million Dollar Boobies who (eventually) became the Magnet Chic.

While I thought about being the Bionic Woman, I realized I would like to document my journey. I created an Excel spreadsheet with all the necessary information: Surgical Dates, Occurrences, Procedure, Physician(s), Hospitals, Complications, Comments, Meds, etc. This list became long and grew fast. When I realized this was not the norm for breast cancer recovery, I knew something was not right. I was thriving and surviving, yes, like the pink Energizer Bunny, but I knew these medical mishaps that prolonged my recovery should not be happening.

This is when I took pen to paper and began to write my story. The good, the bad and the humorous blossomed into a story about love, life, breast cancer, and the pursuit of happiness. I wrote a trilogy of books in which I laid out survivorship as a young widow, followed by breast cancer later in life, walking through family and other life changes.

Writing became therapeutic and cathartic. It helped me heal inside and out. All those awful medical experiences I let go of with pen and paper. I thrived on humor, positivity, creativity, and innovation. Eventually, finding my voice in writing led to my next life chapter: developing a comfortable wrap bra using magnets (à la Magnet Chic) with straps that don't creep down, that hold the medical drains, are in contemporary colorful styles, and so on, but the story of my CRISSCROSS Intimates Collection is a story for another time.

Life isn't about my million-dollar boobs; it's about the millions of words breast cancer has given me to thrive and drive life forward with fortitude, inspiration, and innovation in ways I never thought possible before. ♡