



Chronicles of Hope: Nicole Vazquez

The Chronicles of Hope are the *real life* stories of those helped by Komen for the Cure's commitment to the care, research and understanding of breast cancer. These are their—and our—stories.

When Nicole Vazquez called her mom Belinda on September 21, 2006, she heard, "It must be good news, because you never call me in the middle of the day!" But Nicole, was not calling with good news; she was calling because she had just learned that she had breast cancer.

Nicole's mom was not able to accompany her 34 year old daughter to her initial appointments because she was moving her elderly parents from Puerto Rico to San Antonio, TX to become their primary caregiver. Nicole, who lives in the Dallas area remembers that "it was a little bit overwhelming for my mom, because she also had to be a caregiver for me." Nicole lives approximately five hours away from her parents.

The family worked together to support Nicole so that she didn't have to be alone. Flanked by her best friend and siblings, Nicole learned about her treatment options, further tests she would undergo and possible side effects of chemotherapy, while her sister took notes. Nicole reports that even though she never did well in science at school, her surgeon "explained it so well that I could have taken a test and aced it." When her dad asked if she was interested in getting a second opinion, Nicole said no because her surgeon had answered her questions, given her time to absorb the information and had given her a plan of action she felt confident in.

During another appointment, accompanied by both of her parents, brother and sister, "all in a very small room", Nicole remembers learning of the triple negative status of her tumor. "At the time I didn't really understand what that meant. When he [the oncologist] explained it, he said, 'That makes you a very special case.'" She laughs, saying, "And my mom said, 'Yes, she is our very special daughter.'"

In fact, triple negative disease (TNBC) is an aggressive form of breast cancer, which affects almost twice as many younger women of color as older Caucasians. It is named for the fact that it does not have the receptors common in other forms of breast cancer: estrogen, progesterone, or HER2/neu. Many of the treatments used today are not effective on TNBC because they depend on these receptors as targets for therapy.



Survivor
Nicole Vazquez

Diagnosis
**Triple Negative
Breast Cancer**

Years of Survivorship
4

"Trust your doctor... You have to believe that your doctor is the right one for you. They may be great for someone else, but are they great for you?"

So with her family there every step of the way, Nicole had chemotherapy, a mastectomy, radiation and reconstructive surgery. Nicole encourages others to ask questions and trust their doctors before moving forward.

INVOLVEMENT WITH KOMEN

Nicole was involved with the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure® years before her diagnosis through corporate teams and other groups, but about a year after her own breast cancer experience, a friend told her about an opening at Komen in corporate sponsorships. Nicole discussed the opportunity with her surgeon who asked her to carefully consider this path, asking, “Are you ok with talking about breast cancer every day?”

Ultimately, the answer was “yes” and Nicole reports that she loves her job working with corporate sponsors for the Race for the Cure Series. She says the sponsors are not just trying to “look good” in the community, but rather are looking for a cause that resonates with their brand’s essence. Nicole doesn’t share her experiences with sponsors unless she is asked about the survivor perspective.

“Sometimes I think we take it for granted that we have a story. We don’t really know how it might inspire someone else to do more.”

However, she shares openly with other breast cancer survivors, referring to them as her “survivor sisters” engaging them in national, local and personal programs and interactions to encourage and empower them.

Nicole continues to participate in the Race for the Cure, running in San Antonio with her mom every year since her diagnosis and other cities across Komen’s Affiliate Network. She reports that the survivor parade in Puerto Rico is “the best I’ve ever been to.”

She has also walked part or all of the Susan G. Komen 3-Day for the Cure® in five different cities. This year, she will complete the 60 mile trek in Dallas in celebration of her five year survivorship anniversary.

KOMEN’S TNBC RESEARCH INVESTMENT

Since 2006, Susan G. Komen for the Cure® has invested nearly \$30 million in funding to help answer the many questions surrounding TNBC. Komen for the Cure is supporting the research at every level—from young scientists-in-training, working in labs to learn all they can about the biology of TNBC cells, to established professionals from multiple institutions working together on projects designed to move research results from labs to patients in as little time as possible. To date Komen has funded 48 grants focused on key topics that include identifying risk factors, methods of prevention, TNBC and the BRCA1 gene mutation, developing chemotherapy for TNBC with lower toxicity and identification of new targets for therapy.

In addition, Susan G. Komen for the Cure offers survivors many different opportunities to network and support each other through local Affiliates across the nation.

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