

i will SURVIVE

Being diagnosed with breast cancer at 27 was a life-changing experience for Melina Dichiera, in more ways than one. As she prepares to take centre stage at next month's Pink Ribbon Ball, she talks about her extraordinary journey from victim to survivor.

STORY: MELENIE AMBROSE PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD HATHERLY

If you want an inspirational story of triumph over tragedy, read on. It all began the day Princess Diana died. Back in August, 1997, while the world mourned a famous mother, 27-year-old Melina Dichiera was given what she thought was a death sentence.

Sitting in her car with her mum, Maria, in West Perth on a cold winter's afternoon, Melina sobbed. Four years into her marriage and with a 15-month-old son, she had just been told she had breast cancer.

"It felt like I had been hit by a bus," she says. "The only thing I knew about cancer was that people died from it."

In jeans, red top and fluffy pink slippers, she makes herself comfortable on a sofa in her lounge room to share her bitter-sweet story.

From the empty beer bottles on the veranda, waiting to be filled with home-made Italian tomato sauce, to the family photos perched on every available shelf, it's clear that this is a home where the heart is.

"The official words were, 'Suspicious growth, could be malignant,'" Melina says of her initial diagnosis. It was small, about the size of a 20c piece, and an initial mammogram had failed to find it. An ultrasound told a different story. Five painful biopsies followed before a specialist gave the Dianella mum the bad news.

"You have breast cancer," he said bluntly.

"I still, to this day, don't know how Mum drove

us home," Melina says. "We were both so distressed, I said to her, 'What have I done to cause this?' There is no history of breast cancer in our family. I have never smoked, done drugs or drank a lot. I was the perfect Italian girl."

Shocked, she went home to tell her husband. "When she said, 'I have cancer', I thought 'Oh s***, death,'" says Vince, a maintenance worker. "Everything went in slow motion. I thought, 'We're just married and now my wife is going to die.'"

Melina was soon in hospital undergoing a lumpectomy and having 16 nodes removed from her armpit. Three months of radiotherapy followed. She worked at a giftware shop in Dianella in the morning ("just to keep myself busy and sane") and then, in the afternoon, fell asleep after treatment.

Her mother turned nurse and babysitter, driving her to and from hospital while looking after grandson Christian. But she also had to juggle her other role - round-the-clock carer to her own son, Angelo, 30, deaf and prone to epileptic seizures since a bout of meningitis when he was a baby.

"God gave me the strength to cope with it all," says Maria, with determination. "I had relatives all around the world praying for me. Some went to Lourdes in France to get holy water, others went to the Madonna in Sicily (a holy shrine). I was inundated."

An angel did appear before Melina, but she was of the flesh-and-blood variety. While in

hospital, she was visited by a breast cancer survivor as part of the Cancer Council's in-hospital support program. It was a meeting that changed her life.

"I was thinking, 'She is here! She is alive! This isn't a death sentence. You can get this thing and you can fight it,'" says Melina, who then found - a year after surgery - that she was cancer-free.

Life was looking good as the family packed their bags and headed to the US and Italy for a well-deserved holiday. They even visited Melina's "dream" destination - Elvis Presley's Graceland mansion.

Then, another scare: Melina noticed a discharge from one of her nipples. A swab confirmed the cancer was back. This time the prognosis was bleaker.

"The specialist said the best option was to remove my breast," she says. "That was a big blow. I asked him, 'What about my other breast? What are the chances of the cancer spreading?' He was honest. He said, 'I don't know, but you are at a higher risk.'"

At age 30, Melina made the toughest decision of her life - to have both breasts removed.

"I didn't want to be back in that office again in three years to do it all again," she says. "Twice was enough."

Vince gave her love and support.

"I told her 'If it stops the cancer, go ahead, get them taken off. It's only skin and I will support you all the way. I didn't marry you for your breasts. I married you'," he recalls.

The night before her operation, feeling it was »



all too much for her husband, Melina showed him the door.

"I said, 'Get out!'" she recalls. "Basically I was offering him a divorce. I said 'You can leave now'. But Vince not only stayed, he declared his love once again. 'I said 'You have me for better or worse', he says. That night he held Melina in his arms as she cried herself to sleep.

Melina says she told her four-year-old son, Christian: "Mummy has to go to hospital and have her boobs off because they are making her sick. I won't be able to give you big hugs for a while." Thinking it was big news, Christian shared it with his kindy classmates, telling them: "My mummy is in hospital and she is having her boobs chopped off."

"The teacher rang me in disbelief but I told her it was true," Melina says. "She was apologetic. I said, 'It's just his way of dealing with it.'"

Despite her surgeon calling her a "brave hero", Melina bawled her eyes out when she saw her naked, post-operative torso for the first time in a hospital mirror. But somehow the young mum not only found hope, she found humour.

Given the option of a breast reconstruction, in which doctors usually take skin, fat and muscle tissue from the lower belly, Melina asked if they could take it instead from her bottom.

"That way Vince would be kissing my arse all the time!" she says, laughing. "The surgeon just laughed and said, 'I wish more people were like you.' I said, 'What do you want me to do? Cry about it?'"

She chose to leave her stomach intact and instead wear prosthesis ("I can go up a size each year if I want!" she says). She wanted another child, but though the cancer had gone she had only a slim chance of falling pregnant because of "out of whack" hormones.

Enter the cancer self-help and wellness organisation Balya. The Dichieras attended a Balya retreat in bushland at Jarrahdale. With no TV or contact with the outside world, the couple took time to "re-connect as husband and wife" after their ordeal.

"It was a special place," says Melina. "Birds singing every morning, kangaroos hopping around, an opportunity to meet other patients and partners."

And a place where, against all odds, Melina fell pregnant.

"I was thrilled but shocked, conceiving just two months after my double mastectomy," she says.

But within weeks, she was back in hospital, on a drip. Her morning sickness was so severe she couldn't keep anything down. Doctors even suggested "in a nice way" that it might be an idea to terminate her pregnancy.

"I said, 'I have been to hell and back. I am pregnant for a reason. This child is meant to be. I will suffer and endure whatever I have to.'"

For four months she lay in a hospital bed and



Melina Dichiera with her husband Vince and children Marcella and Christian.

Live in the moment. We take a closer look at life now and enjoy it more, not sweat the small stuff

for the rest of her pregnancy was in and out of hospital every couple of weeks. By the time the baby was due, she had lost 20kg.

"She was like a stick. She couldn't even open her eyes," says Maria, who would sleep on a mattress on the hospital floor beside her daughter who didn't have the strength to ring for a nurse.

On March 30, 2001, Marcella Dichiera entered the world via caesarean. Weighing in at 7lb 10oz (3.46kg) she was a picture of health.

"The doctor called her 'bella', meaning 'beautiful' in Italian," Melina says. "He said I almost killed him with all the trouble I caused being sick, but looking at Marcella when she was born, it was all worth it."

Now aged 11, Marcella is in Year 6. She's been dubbed "the Bayla Baby" by family and friends, loves to dance and wants to be a singer.

Christian is 16, in Year 11, loves drama and school musicals and can hardly wait to go on a trip to Italy in January.

"Mum's an inspiration to lots of people," says Christian. "She's been through so much, but she lives her life to the max. It's been tough on us as a family, but we have all helped each other."

Two years ago, Maria - who had stood by her daughter every step of the way through her illness while looking after her own disabled son - was herself diagnosed with breast cancer. Hers was a different, more aggressive form of the disease called Triple Negative Breast Cancer.

"I felt so guilty because she had chemotherapy and I didn't, and I knew that her journey was going to be tougher than mine," Melina says.

"All I could think about was, 'This is my mum and mums are not supposed to get sick.'"

After two lumpectomies, having nodes removed, six months of chemo and six weeks of radiotherapy, Maria also is now cancer-free. "I never lost my religious faith," she says. "I

thought, 'It's OK, He (Jesus) will look after me, and He did.'"

Melina has devoted herself to helping others with breast cancer and to raising awareness and funds to combat the disease. She's been a volunteer with the Cancer Council, a founding member of the Breast Cancer Foundation of WA (now known as Breast Cancer Care) and in 2000 started a support group for breast cancer patients under 40 with the creative title of The Young and the Breastless.

Today, she's a face of hope at hospitals and breast-fitting specialists Femme de Femme.

On the personal side, she's gone back to study to become an educational assistant and joined the Perth Amazons dragon boat team - a group of breast-cancer survivors and supporters.

So it seems fitting that on October 6, Melina Dichiera will be centrestage at this year's annual Pink Ribbon Ball. Appointed an ambassador for the National Breast Cancer Foundation last year, she will share her story with more than 600 guests.

So far the NBCF has raised more than \$81 million to help fund about 300 Australian-based research projects.

But with breast cancer the most commonly diagnosed cancer among women (an estimated one in nine will succumb to the disease) there is still a long way to go.

"NBCF's goal is have zero deaths by 2030. How good would that be?" says Melina with a smile.

As to what her personal battles have taught her, she says: "You have to live in the moment. We take a closer look at life now and enjoy it more, not sweat the small stuff. Breast cancer is not a death sentence; it is a challenge." **STM**

» **Pink Ribbon Ball, Oct 6. Tickets \$200, includes four-course dinner, entertainment and prizes. Call 1300 175 388 or visit www.momentumwf.com.au for more information.**

PICTURE: ROSS SWANBOROUGH