

**Winning Speech of the Colonel W. T. Bondurant, Jr. Oratorical Contest
January 2008**



A Survivor's Story

Over the past twelve years, my family, teachers, and friends have influenced the type of person that I am today. Personal struggles throughout my

life also have affected me tremendously. These life experiences have taught me to be stronger in situations that might lead some people to despair. I have developed an inner strength that will help me through hardships in the future.

One personal family struggle that I have learned a great deal from is my mother's battle with breast cancer. From my experience, I have learned that cancer impacts the entire family, not just the victim.

I was barely one year old when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was thirty-three years old and had only been married for two and one-half years. I was with my mother, playing on her bed, when my father ambled into the bedroom with his hands covering his face. It sounded as if he was laughing heartily, so my mother asked, "What's so funny?" My father removed his hands from his face, and we saw tears streaming from his eyes. "It's cancer," he cried. Since I was just a toddler, I did not understand the circumstance at the time, but I knew there was something wrong. My mother's initial reaction was disbelief. She comforted my father and told him that it was a "big mistake."

We later learned that the diagnosis was correct. We were terribly concerned for my mother, because most young women diagnosed with breast cancer only survived a few years before their untimely deaths.

Our lives changed in the blink of an eye. From then on, whenever I played games with my parents, like “Underwater,” a game in which I would pretend to be a fish under the blankets—which used to be so much fun—it did not feel the same. Other activities were affected as well. My mother used to take me to the zoo and local parks, but during the time she was ill, we spent most of our days at home. She had to quit work during her treatments, and she stopped sending me to day-care. The atmosphere at home became more serious. My father cried frequently, but in secret. My mother tried to stay positive and, for my sake, make our family life as normal as possible. She tried to hide the side effects of the chemotherapy by always wearing a wig. She did not want anyone, especially my father and me, to see her without hair. I clearly remember the day that I walked into my parents’ closet and witnessed my mother, who was just starting to put on her wig, with only a few strands of hair on her head. For a few seconds I was speechless; then I could not help but holler frantically, “Put the hair back on; put it back on!” She quickly slapped the wig back on her head, so that I could calm down from the shock.

My mother sat me down and explained that the loss of her hair was due to the side effects from her treatments. Now, years later, I realize how vulnerable she was

standing there and how much she was trying to protect me. She did not want me to be scared, or worry about her.

Fortunately, it has been eleven years since my father walked into the bedroom to deliver that dreadful news, and my mother's cancer has not returned. She has survived with the help of a supportive family, capable doctors, thoughtful friends, and a strong faith in God. My father, in particular, has made sacrifices for my mother. He believes that God listens to our prayers through sacrifice, so he made a pact with God that he would fast until noon every day if God would keep my mother alive. He has made this sacrifice for the past eleven years and continues to do so.

During the six months that my mother received chemotherapy, she was defenseless to common infections, due to a weakened immune system. She could not work or be surrounded by people, because if she was exposed to a common illness, like a cold, it could become a serious threat to her health. My parents' friends and family came to her aid during this difficult time. They supported her by bringing food to our home, praying for her, and accompanying her to numerous doctors' visits.

My mother tells me that I was the biggest reason she got through her cancer. I kept her occupied with things that keep new mothers busy. She had no time to

dwell on her cancer diagnosis. She had to live. She wanted to live. She wanted to see me grow up. I cannot imagine what life would have been like without her these past years.

All of this, in combination with my family's courage, allowed us to triumph over her cancer. A cancer diagnosis can instill hopelessness in some people, but Dorothy Thompson, an American journalist and writer, inspires us to be courageous when faced with challenges during desperate times. "Courage, it would seem, is nothing less than the power to overcome danger, misfortune, fear, injustice, while continuing to affirm inwardly that life with all its sorrows is good; that everything is meaningful even if in a sense beyond our understanding; and that there is always tomorrow." Like Dorothy Thompson, I believe that families can find the good in the worst situations, and that hope should not be lost during the toughest of times.

From this experience, my family and I have become strong supporters of other women with breast cancer and have helped raise funds for breast cancer research by participating in the Susan G. Komen "Race for the Cure." I have developed a strong connection to this cause because of my family's experience with this disease. I have taken notice that breast cancer exists among others I have encountered in my life. A beloved teacher at San Antonio Academy, Mrs. Luisa Bolen, has won the battle against breast cancer. She lives her life with great joy

and is loved by all her students. Mrs. Bolen is also a strong supporter of the “Race for the Cure” and is a loyal participant.

When I participate in the Race for the Cure, I notice other children, younger than myself, whose mothers are battling this disease. I can empathize with these children and offer them encouragement because my family and I were able to triumph over this horrible illness. I can tell them “not to worry about it,” because scientists are exploring new remedies for curing their mothers’ breast cancer. I would also inform them that my mother has survived eleven years with regular treatments and that new improvements are being made every day, so hope should not be lost.

I have learned that breast cancer is not a discriminating disease. It affects women of all ages, races, and cultures. It does not matter if a woman is rich or poor, healthy or not. In fact, most victims, like my mother, have no family history of breast cancer. In the eleven years I have participated in the Race for the Cure, I have seen the number of people supporting this cause grow. I have observed that there are many more “pink shirts” or survivors at the event every year. I am overjoyed to witness that many more women are surviving, just like my mother. This experience has taught me that people can become stronger by enduring hardships. As the French Proverb states, “Despair doubles our strength.”

My family could have given up, but instead we battled on, became stronger and more determined to make the situation better. This hardship has helped mold the person I am today. My family's struggle and triumph with breast cancer have taught me valuable lessons in hope, perseverance, and love. Every first weekend in April, you will find me running proudly in the Race for the Cure, with a sign on my back that reads: "In celebration of my mother."