

# BEATING THE ODDS

WHEN THIS DOMINICAN JOURNALIST INTERVIEWED BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS EARLIER IN HER CAREER, SHE NEVER IMAGINED THAT ONE DAY SHE'D FIND HERSELF IN THEIR SHOES.

BY DORKYS RAMOS



■ **AS A PROFESSIONAL HEALTH** writer for women's magazines, whenever I've interviewed someone afflicted with a disease, I always sympathize with her plight. And even though I usually walk away from each story subject wishing there was more I could do, I've never deluded myself into thinking that I know what she's going through. Then I discovered I had breast cancer.

The diagnosis came out of nowhere. My gynecologist found a pea-sized lump in my left breast during a routine visit last November and requested I go for an ultrasound "just to make sure." I easily clung to his reassurance that "you're young" and "it's highly unlikely." After all, I am 30 and have an A-cup chest, and the disease does not run in my family. When I returned for a biopsy, I was once again told that the possibility was low.

Then in December came the phone call that turned my life upside down. As I heard the word "cancer," I fought back tears and only allowed myself to fall apart on my boyfriend Andrew's lap when the doctor hung up. I kicked, screamed and cried into my hands, wondering what I did to deserve this. In the days that followed, I let myself believe that this was a mistake that could be resolved with a few more tests, but a visit with my gynecologist set me straight.

As soon as they heard the news, my boyfriend, family and friends became my little army of proactive ninjas, accompanying me to appointments, calling doctors and research-

ing treatments when I was still too scared and dazed to do it myself. After years of encouraging my readers to take an active stance in their health, I just couldn't be bothered when it came to my own. Sedating my mind and going through the motions seemed like an easier pill to swallow. That eventually gave way to playing 20 questions with every single doctor and nurse I encountered and learning everything I needed to know before, during and after any procedure. The more I prepared, the less afraid I was of the unexpected.

Treating cancer became my full-time job. My days were consumed by trips to the hospital and MRIs, mammograms, PET scans and blood tests. Luckily, the cancer was in stage one and I tested negative for the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, which increase the risk of developing breast and ovarian cancers and influence the severity of the disease, so my treatments involved a lumpectomy and 16 days of radiation rather than a more aggressive mastectomy and chemotherapy.

When my surgery rolled around in January, I decided to face it like a superhero. Although I was extremely nervous, I put my loved ones at ease by pretending I was invincible so that they could in turn be strong for me. And it worked. Through Facebook comments, text messages and phone calls, I had a steady flow of kick-ass positivity that kept me going until those final minutes when I was ushered into the creepy operating room, laid out like Jesus on the table and

given general anesthesia. My body shook from nerves, but before I could even start counting down from 10, I was waking up, in tears and looking up at my mom, who, along with all our relatives in the Dominican Republic, had prayed to every *santo* for my recovery.

Fast-forward to the present, and I'm still reeling from the emotional roller coaster. I feel mangled and a little damaged, as my left boob is now slightly larger than the right due to swelling after surgery, and the skin around it is darker from radiation treatment months ago. But I have to remind myself that I'm still here, all of me, save for a small cancerous lump over my heart that foolishly tried to do me in.

Currently I'm on tamoxifen, a pill I have to take for five years to lower my chances of recurrence to about 9 percent. Unfortunately, this also means I cannot have children until I'm 36, which was the second-hardest piece of information I received. It's not like Andrew and I are ready for that step, but to have that choice taken away from me—no matter that it's temporary—has been one of the toughest things to accept about battling cancer.

But instead of being upset that I have to wait longer than I'd expected to have a baby, I look at it as having five more years of freedom to be selfish and pursue every goal I'd ever dreamed of before becoming a mom. Not to mention gaining a rock-solid response to any nosy *tías* who dare ask, "¿Y cuando vas a tener hijos?"