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THE BIOGRAPHY OF NANCY BRINKER

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DEBORAH M. GILL, PH.D.

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KATHY KEY

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INTRODUCTION

Nancy Brinker, the founder of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, dramatically changed our culture's attitude toward breast cancer. Twenty years ago, one rarely spoke the word "cancer," yet alone the word "breast." Through Nancy's tireless efforts, the subject of breast cancer is now openly discussed; she managed to take a taboo subject and bring it to the attention of the media. This, in turn, has led to groundbreaking research in the field. Though a definitive cure still eludes medical experts, Nancy Brinker has forged a way to save many lives through early detection and screening.

Deeply touched by breast cancer in her own family, Nancy followed her heart's cry to find a cure and provide compassionate patient care. The foundation, named in her late sister's honor, continues to provide millions of dollars toward breast cancer research and education. If a breast cancer cure emerges in future years, it will no doubt be through the combined efforts of Nancy Brinker and the foundation she leads.

PART 1

THE BIOGRAPHY OF NANCY BRINKER

Born in 1946 to a real estate developer, Nancy Goodman-Brinker followed the birth of an older sister, Susan G. Goodman. Both sisters, raised in the Jewish faith, followed their mother's example of serving the community. Mrs. Goodman taught her daughters to be good stewards of their resources, and to give freely.¹ The two sisters took their mother's teaching to heart. Responding compassionately toward friends who battled polio, the young elementary-aged sisters organized a variety show, which raised sixty-four dollars for the Polio Association.²

The sisters lived in a very loving and structured home, disciplined by a father who demanded respect and challenged the sisters to be their best. Susan was the compliant and meek child, while Nancy was quick and curious. Everyone who met Susan adored her. She was beautiful, and showed kindness and goodness to everyone. Nancy was bigger, heavier, and taller than other girls her age, receiving attention through mischief-making and acting like a tomboy. Nancy's frantic and impatient nature contrasted with Susan's calmness and patience.

The first time Nancy and Susan heard the words "breast cancer" occurred in 1956. Aunt Rose lived in New York City and had recently undergone a mastectomy. The sisters flew on an airplane by themselves to visit their glamorous and delightful aunt. They listened intently as Aunt Rose told of her exotic trip to Africa and her tales of adventure. Nancy admired her aunt, who exuded independence and a free spirit.

¹Nancy G. Brinker, *Winning the Race* (Irving, TX: Tapestry Press, 2001), 69.

²Ibid, 70.

On the third night of the sisters' stay with Aunt Rose, the young girls encountered the reality of breast cancer in a shocking way. Susan and Nancy entered Aunt Rose's room without knocking, and found her bare-chested. Aunt Rose's chest was concave and burned from high-voltage radiation treatments, with grotesque scars running across her chest. Susan was horrified by the sight, which continued to haunt her through the rest of her life.³ As Aunt Rose sang happily in her bedroom, though, Nancy concluded that despite Aunt Rose's physical appearance, she was still living a full and happy life.

Susan eventually married her college sweetheart, Stan Komen, and chose to live in the same hometown as her parents. Nancy decided to move to Dallas after college graduation, much to the reluctance of her father. Knowing that her father expected her to support herself, Nancy marched into Neiman-Marcus and told the personnel director that she needed a good job because her parents were not happy about her move to Texas. She landed a job as an executive trainee, and learned the art of marketing and public relations from the store's namesake, Stanley Marcus.⁴

Nancy and Susan continued to enjoy a close relationship, remaining best friends into adulthood. The sisters agreed to take care of their parents together and committed to support each other through their own elderly years. Their young minds did not consider that their lives might take a different path than they imagined.

Susan and Nancy both routinely experienced lumpy breasts caused by fibrocystic disease. Occasionally Susan's doctor performed needle aspirations to drain the fluid-filled cysts. He reassured her that eight out of ten lumps are non-cancerous. However, the doctor recommended a

³Nancy G. Brinker, *Winning the Race* (Irving, TX: Tapestry Press, 2001), 18-19.

⁴Ibid, 21.

biopsy of one particular lump. Susan nervously called Nancy to tell her the news. Nancy sensed uneasiness in Susan's voice, prompting Nancy to fly home on the day of the scheduled biopsy. When Nancy departed the plane, her father met her with a grave face. Nancy instantly knew the diagnosis was breast cancer for the thirty-three year old Susan.

With haunting memories of Aunt Rose, Susan was terrified at the prospect of a mastectomy. She was more than happy to listen to a surgeon who boldly claimed he could cure her without radical surgery. Nancy questioned the surgeon's comment, knowing that cancer experts around the country refrained from using the word "cure." However, Susan chose not to research any other options, preferring to trust the doctors who promised to make her better.

After surgery, Susan was convinced that she would not encounter the dreaded disease again. When Nancy suggested getting a second opinion, Susan reacted negatively. After six months, Susan found another lump in her breast, which proved to be malignant. This time Susan agreed to treatment at the Mayo Clinic, followed by treatment at M. D. Anderson.

During a period of severe sickness caused by chemotherapy and radiation treatments, Susan asked Nancy to help her create a beautiful and positive environment in the treatment rooms. The appalling handling and drab waiting rooms bothered Susan. She wanted to make the waiting rooms attractive, as well as find a way to speed up the research of breast cancer. "Nan," she said, "as soon as I get better, let's do something about this."⁵ In the last conversation that Nancy and Susan had face to face, Susan again asked Nancy to do something to help the sick women in the hospital.⁶ As she prepared to board a plane, Nancy hugged her beloved sister's

⁵Nancy G. Brinker, *Winning the Race* (Irving, TX: Tapestry Press, 2001), 33.

⁶*Ibid.*, 36.

frail frame, telling her she loved her and promising to find a way to help. Nancy never saw her sister alive again. Susan G. Komen died at the age of thirty-six years old, leaving behind a loving husband and two small children.

Nancy's grief and pain overwhelmed her. Soon after the death of her sister, Nancy met her future husband, Norman Brinker. Nancy appreciated the depth of his character, and bonded with him from their first conversation. Norman's first wife, tennis star Maureen Connolly, had died of ovarian cancer in 1969. He was one of the few people who understood Nancy's pain and loss. They married on Valentine's Day, 1981.⁷

Susan's plea to help the women enduring breast cancer haunted Nancy. Urged by her husband, she began a charity with only two hundred dollars and a typewriter. The mission of the charity was to raise and dedicate funds for breast cancer research. Nancy thoroughly studied breast cancer, asking the National Institutes of Health to send her all the information available on the subject. Wherever she went, she talked about breast cancer. Since the subject was taboo at the time, she was not the most popular person at parties. With the help of a few friends, she turned two hundred dollars into one hundred fifty thousand dollars by the end of 1983.

In January of 1984, Nancy found a lump in her own breast that felt different. The lump felt hard, in contrast to the rubbery lumps she had felt in the past. In her heart, she knew this lump was cancerous. Losing no time, she immediately went to M. D. Anderson for evaluation. The surgeon and radiologist initially felt the tumor was benign because of its round size and clear definition. (The word "cancer" originates from a Latin word meaning "crab."⁸ Cancer was

⁷ Nancy G. Brinker, *Winning the Race* (Irving, TX: Tapestry Press, 2001), 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

traditionally considered to have the same shape as a crab, with arms and legs extending out from the body.)

A few weeks later, Nancy's doctor detected the tumor was growing and recommended an immediate biopsy. The results proved Nancy's instincts were right; it was a malignant tumor. Following surgery and further testing, the surgeon reported the cancer was in an early stage. At the time, Nancy was only thirty-six years old. Generally, the younger the patient, the more aggressively the cancer spreads. Her doctor decided on an aggressive treatment plan, including chemotherapy.

Throughout her treatment and recovery, Nancy never stopped working for others. While in the hospital, she walked to the therapy room to get exercise. There she encountered bored patients working through therapy exercises to help their recovery. As she stood and watched them, she heard Susan's voice whispering, "Do something, Nan."⁹ The next day she bought six portable tape players and headsets for the patients in the therapy room.

By this time, Nancy was the most well educated breast cancer patient around. Even though she had seen the worst effects of the disease, nothing prepared her for the shock of finding cancer in her own body. Betty Ford, who publicly battled her own breast cancer, called Nancy to offer support. When Nancy began to cry during the conversation, Mrs. Ford directed her to Psalm 23. She told Nancy that the Word says one walks through the valley of the shadow of death; one does not stop there. Nancy determined to do whatever it would take to rid herself of this dreaded disease. She would fight the disease, not only for herself, but also for the reputation of the foundation.

⁹Nancy G. Brinker, *Winning the Race* (Irving, TX: Tapestry Press, 2001), 50.

As Nancy continued treatments, she recognized how some women at M. D. Anderson could not afford the financial burden of battling cancer, nor receive proper screening. Soon, the Susan G. Komen Foundation made a half-million-dollar grant to Parkland Hospital in Dallas, to provide treatment for low-income women.¹⁰

As Nancy Brinker continued to serve as chairperson for the foundation, she insisted the foundation operate with sound business practices and remain in the black. To do this, the staff (referred to as a “band of angels”) volunteered their time in the tireless pursuit of a breast cancer cure.¹¹

The mission of the foundation continues to be “to eradicate breast cancer as a life-threatening disease by advancing research, education, screening, and treatment.”¹² Nancy Brinker’s promise to her sister started a revolution that spread the mission of the foundation across the country.

The Komen Race for the Cure began in Dallas in 1983, where eight hundred women ran in the first race. Twenty-five years later, millions run in cities across America, as well as in Europe, raising sizeable amounts of funding. Looking for additional ways to provide funding, the foundation came up with a new idea to help raise financial support: cause-related marketing. At first, doors slammed in Nancy’s face as she searched for corporate sponsors. With her

¹⁰Nancy G. Brinker, *Winning the Race* (Irving, TX: Tapestry Press, 2001), 60.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 74.

¹²*Ibid.*, 78.

perseverance, corporate sponsors, such as Ford, Hallmark, New Balance, and Yoplait, now help raise funding and awareness for the cure for breast cancer.¹³

Nancy Brinker has received numerous awards and honors in her lifetime, including serving as the American Ambassador to Hungary, White House Chief of Protocol, and most recently receiving the Medal of Freedom, presented by President Obama. She decided to turn over the reigns of the foundation to others who could move the organization farther along in its mission. As Nancy emphasized, “If we aren’t moving forward, we are moving backward.”¹⁴

One of Nancy’s core beliefs is that each person has the power to change the world. “Everyone, every day, can do one thing to make the world a better place,” she said.¹⁵ When her dying sister asked for her promise to help others, Nancy truly understood the difference between working for a paycheck and being willing to die for a cause. “That promise between two sisters became the passion of my life and the fabric that has sustained the Komen Foundation ever since,” she said.¹⁶

Nancy Brinker believes in living out one’s passion and pursuing it with reckless abandon. Her pursuit of her passion has far outweighed her pursuit of material comforts. She recognizes that her success comes not from a bank balance, but in the value added to people’s lives.¹⁷

¹³Ibid., 76-77.

¹⁴Nancy Brinker, “2008 Affiliate Leadership Conference February 8, 2008, Dallas, TX” MIDI file, <http://ww5.komen.org/news.aspx> (accessed October 10, 2009).

¹⁵Leah Fabel, “Credo: Nancy Goodman Brinker” April 24, 2009, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/local/people/Credo-Nancy-Goodman-Brinker-43636377.html> (accessed September 29, 2009).

¹⁶Nancy Brinker, “Boston University Baccalaureate Service Address” <http://www.bu.edu/phpbin/news/releases/display.php?id=1130>, (accessed September 29, 2009).

¹⁷Ibid.

Through the foundation, Nancy has kept the memory of her sister alive. Recently Nancy toured the Holy Land, observing the holy sites and churches dedicated to the history of the Jewish nation. Her mind pondered the words of Isaiah, stating the Lord would give a memorial and a name that will not be cut off (see Isaiah 56:5).¹⁸ The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation is a name and memorial of a promise made more than thirty years ago to a loving sister. That promise ended the silence and shame of breast cancer, empowering women to take charge of their health.¹⁹

Nancy Brinker fulfilled her promise to Susan, her sister and best friend. That promise continues to affect the lives of women around the world today, working toward a cure to eliminate the threat of breast cancer for future generations.

CONCLUSION

When examining the life of Nancy Brinker, one must also study the life of her sister, Susan G. Goodman-Komen. Their lives and stories intertwined, and gave birth to a foundation that affects other women's lives today around the world. The story of the creation of the Susan G. Komen Foundation is a story of love, loss, promise, and passion.

The love of these two sisters was strong and enduring, even in death. The loss of Nancy's sister occurred right after she asked Nancy to do something to help other women facing the same fate. That promise led to a passionate pursuit of a cure for breast cancer that drives Nancy Brinker even today.

¹⁸All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

¹⁹Nancy Brinker, "2008 Affiliate Leadership Conference February 8, 2008, Dallas, TX" MIDI file, <http://ww5.komen.org/news.aspx> (accessed October 10, 2009).

The life of Nancy Brinker challenges women to find their passion and pursue it, to spend their lives in service for others, to persevere through the hardest trials, and to maintain the highest standards of character and integrity. Nancy serves as a living example to women around the globe. May each woman find her life's passion and pursue it with reckless abandon, changing lives one at a time, by following the example of Nancy Brinker.

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