

# ONE Last Question

WITH  
LISA CRITES & SHERRY PALMER



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## Breast Friends, Lisa Crites & Sherry Palmer

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**SCL:** *For those new to the area or the subject, can you each tell us a little about where you've been and where you're going?*

**LISA:** I was 41 years old when diagnosed with breast cancer. It was an absolute shock, as I had no family history of the disease and by all accounts, up until then, conceivably healthy. I quickly chose to undergo a bilateral mastectomy. During multiple surgeries, I was reduced to showering in a plastic trash bag to protect my surgical drain sites from bacteria-laden tap water. With that personal experience, I moved forward to design and manufacture a product to help future patients. We now distribute The Shower Shirt nationally and internationally to post-mastectomy and chest surgery patients who have drains, ports and/or catheters.

**SHERRY:** I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008, discovered with my yearly mammogram, so I was scheduled for a lumpectomy, but that quickly changed when I had an MRI and we discovered I had a second kind of breast cancer in the other breast, so it was on to a bilateral mastectomy, reconstruction and chemo. Like everyone, after surgery a shower was my first consideration, but I quickly found out that the only way to keep my bandages dry was using a garbage bag. A couple of years ago, I had my implants replaced and got to use one of Lisa's Shower Shirts. I smiled all the way through my shower; it was so easy to use and I was once again starting to feel better.

**SCL:** *Do you remember when your paths crossed, and did this combined effort develop immediately?*

**LISA:** Yes, it was late 2009 when I was attending a *SpaceCoast Living* event to celebrate the October issue for Breast Cancer Awareness Month. I remember the event vividly because it was the first time *SpaceCoast Living* had gone all out to profile a myriad of Brevard County breast cancer patients.

Once The Shower Shirt Co. could donate Shower Shirt garments to Breast Friends, we quickly did so. I specifically wanted to contribute for those who could not afford them. Cancer is expensive, so this is one less expense those women in need would have. The best part of the arrangement is the shirts are used. The women are so cute. They use them, wash them, and bring them back to the Breast Friends office for the next person in need.

In looking back on that very special event in October 2009 (when Sherry and I met) and the magazine cover photo specifically, two things come to mind. The first, I had only one breast due to mastectomy infection complications. During that photo shoot, I kept telling my friend, Donna Skattum (the former editor of *SpaceCoast Living*), I needed to face left not right because I only had a right breast. My second thought: The Shower Shirt was only a vision in the mind of that person standing in the middle on the cover.

**SHERRY:** I remember that *SpaceCoast Living* event! I was handing out informational flyers about what we were doing, providing a place for newly diagnosed ladies to call to talk and get information. As we have grown, we have also been able to provide many helpful supplies, and of course, access to our Shower Shirt Closet from which they may borrow as needed.

**SCL:** *What are your challenges today? What can our readers do to help?*

**LISA:** Our biggest challenge is not having Medicare coverage so every breast cancer patient would be reimbursed when purchasing a Shower Shirt. However, with or without Medicare coverage, we will still provide this product for all who are in need.

**SHERRY:** Our biggest challenge is trying to make sure every woman in Brevard knows what we have to offer and that everything is free. We also have "girls' meetings" each month so they can get more information, support, hugs, humor, whatever they need. We don't want any of our gals to go through breast cancer alone.

**SCL:** *"Breast Friends" has become "Driven by Heart." Tell us about the change and what it means in our community.*

**SHERRY:** Yes, we have a new name as of August 15, 2017; our goals remain the same, as do our programs. As our own entity, we are truly “taking care of Brevard.” It seemed we were always referring to being driven by our hearts, so it was the perfect choice.

**SCL:** *As each of you is a survivor, any last words of wisdom from your journey?*

**LISA:** Don't let breast cancer define your life. Make sure it only refines your life. My hope is my work with The Shower Shirt, providing an option for patients during the post-mastectomy care process is working towards that refinement.

**SHERRY:** I agree with Lisa; don't let it define you. It is a life-changing event; do what you have to do to get well again and enjoy every day. It sounds a little odd saying this, but prior to breast cancer I had a great life. Getting to know all the folks in this county that want to help us fight this fight has touched my heart in so many ways and enriched my life even more.

## From The Editor

October is our Breast Cancer Survivor issue, and the one we're most proud to assemble each year. The stories we print in October are uplifting and inspiring. We are often at our best when life takes a sudden turn for the unexpected. In talking to Sherry Palmer at Driven by Heart (previously Breast Friends) for another article, I found one woman's experience worth sharing. This is Sarah May's journey, as told by her.

“In February 2015, my life changed forever. I was 35 years old, happily married with a wonderful two-year-old daughter, and life was very good. Then my husband discovered a large lump in my left breast. My OB/GYN checked it out and, after some testing, it turned out that I had a different type of cancer in each breast. I was shocked, terrified and devastated. Because I had no known family history (my father was raised by his aunt and his family history was unknown, and my mother was adopted), I underwent genetic testing and found out that I was positive for a genetic mutation (BRCA2). Not only did I have to deal with breast cancer, but also with the idea that for the rest of my life I would be on high alert for developing other types of cancer. I picked myself up and powered on through my treatment plan, and on my daughter's second birthday, I had a bilateral mastectomy with reconstruction. I felt that my surgery was my very special gift to her, hoping it would mean that I would be around for a very long time. After 16 rounds of chemotherapy over a period of five months and many surgeries, I am now healthy and thriving, living my 'new' normal. In May 2017, I also opted to have a prophylactic hysterectomy and oophorectomy, a difficult decision because it meant that I would not be able to give birth to another child, but I chose to have the surgery to greatly reduce my risk of developing ovarian cancer.

“I'm now an outspoken advocate for genetic testing. Knowledge is empowerment; the identification of a genetic mutation can allow women to manage their risk for cancer. It can open so many doors for insurance coverage, allowing for surveillance and preventative screening for related cancers.

“It was uplifting to witness the many ways that people reached out to support my family, from cooking a meal, to taking me to doctor appointments, to caring for our daughter. I will always appreciate the support and kindness my family received during that time, and it is my hope that my story will touch someone and that they are encouraged to start a dialogue with their doctor about medical testing.”