

“I wanted a baby. I wanted a life. This thing [breast cancer] wasn't going to take that from me.”

THE GIFT OF *each moment*

ADRIENNE CATHERALL

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MOST OF US BELIEVE A CANCER DIAGNOSIS IS THE WORST THING THAT COULD EVER HAPPEN TO US. ADRIENNE CATHERALL HAS RECEIVED THIS NEWS TWICE. SHE SAT DOWN WITH CANDICE JAYDE OLIVE TO TALK ABOUT HER BATTLE WITH REOCCURRING BREAST CANCER AND HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED FOR BETTER, AND FOR WORSE, THE SECOND TIME AROUND.

When Adrienne Catherall's doctor diagnosed her with breast cancer for the first time, he told her husband, "Now you'll have to listen carefully, because your wife has stopped listening. She's just heard the word 'cancer', and that will be it for her for today".

This disease was a completely foreign concept for Adrienne. A 30-year-old newlywed whose main ambition was to build a family, cancer was not something she or her friends worried about. In 1988, breast cancer awareness was minimal and the media did little to promote self-examination and the importance of mammograms.

Killing time with a *Cleo* magazine with her work friends, the women read an article about breast cancer. "Half-jokingly, we decided we would go home and duly examine ourselves and report back after the weekend." Adrienne discovered a pea-sized lump in her left breast.

After an examination with a breast cancer specialist and a needle biopsy, Adrienne received a phone call insisting she return to the hospital the next day. "It was only when they asked me to bring my husband that I realised the gravity of the situation," she says.

The next six months passed in a "sickening blur", which left her with one breast damaged by radiation therapy. "I felt like imploding. There was nothing in my life but misery. But you've got to pick yourself up at that point and brush yourself off," she says sternly. "I had so much to live for. I wanted a baby. I wanted a life. This thing wasn't going to take that from me."

Adrienne's mission to beat the disease and raise a family was successful. In 1998, her daughter, Caitlin, was born. "Having Caitlin and spending the next 13 years cancer-free has been the most joyful time of my life," she says. Adrienne tells me how she is grateful for these years, no matter what the disease has done to her. "I've raised a beautiful, intelligent and loving daughter. I also have a supportive husband who has been with me through every moment of this battle. Nothing can touch that."

After spending years "being prepared" for the reoccurrence of the disease, she was still disheartened to find abnormalities in her left breast at age 53. Because of the tissue damage to the breast from therapy years earlier, the physical changes caused by the cancer were hard to identify. "Both a mammogram and an ultrasound failed to find the cancer this time around. Things didn't feel right. When I approached my specialist she was hesitant to give me the all clear. She followed her gut, and I was lucky she did."

At the time of her second diagnosis, Adrienne was working at Buderim Views Aged Care. "I thought the palliative care situation was going to be hard for me, but I found that working with people who were facing death was actually very therapeutic. It was like I had permission to forget about my life entirely."

In her second battle, Adrienne has relished the support of family, friends and groups dedicated to people dealing with the disease. "The Look Good Feel Better group members were amazing. They reinforced the importance of taking pride in yourself, to be truly positive about your inside and your outside."

With two more heavy treatments and 12 weekly sessions before Adrienne finishes chemotherapy in January next year, she has a message for survivors of all forms of cancer.

"Your health is your greatest asset, so be vigilant and understand that your best doctor might not be the one that's around the corner. Find someone who's going to go the extra mile and give you the care you deserve."

Adrienne recognises that it's all about being in control of the way you think. "You can't let this thing eat you up. In the time I was healthy my husband and I had a beautiful daughter, I got out there and made sure I fully appreciated every minute. I turned my whole life around.

"Whether you've got a day to live or 40 more years, today, this moment, is what counts." ■