

# A Bend in the Road

## one woman's journey through breast cancer

By Donna Dettman

IT WAS A SATURDAY NIGHT. I WAS LYING ON THE COUCH, TOO TIRED TO GO UP TO BED. THE HOUSE WAS SLEEPY QUIET AROUND ME. I rolled over, and felt the lump. All of a sudden I was wide awake, all traces of sleep gone. I felt fear, cold and hard, and I huddled under the afghan for warmth. The silence of the quiet house roared in my ears and matched the echoing scream in my mind that went on and on.

I fell into a black void, a fog, tumbling over and over. I had no control over my body. It was as if something else did - something I couldn't see. That unseen something was very large, very menacing and very near. I felt powerless, vulnerable, and very much alone. And yet at the same time I felt as if I was watching my life happen to someone else, like a play on a stage. From that moment it was as if there was two of me. One Donna wondered what she should wear to church the next day, and how would she get the laundry finished before Monday, while the other Donna huddled under the afghan with her fist crammed in her mouth to stop the sobbing.

It never occurred to me not to tell my husband Mark—I tell him everything, he's my best friend. Somehow the words tumbled out of my mouth as I climbed into bed. "I found a lump in my breast." It was easier, I think, to say those awful words in the dark. "No, not that!" he said. "Are you sure? Where is it? Can I touch it?" That very large, very menacing thing was in our bedroom with us and I moved to the center of the bed, closer to Mark. Somehow, we fell asleep clutching each other.

The first person to examine me was the physician's assistant. The first thing she said was, "Let me get the doctor, he's right next door." Next I heard "We're going to need some more tests. Let me see what we can get set up for you. Are you all right?" Through the roaring in my head I nodded and said "yes, I'm fine." How could I do that? It amazed me, even then, that I could act so calm when my life as I knew it was turning upside down and inside out. I



*life*



*love*



*laughter*

had gone to the doctor alone, not thinking about what might happen next. I stepped outside and called Mark; "Come NOW!" I said. But he was 20 minutes away. By the time he reached my side I clutched slips of paper in my hand—appointments for ultrasound, mammogram. He looked so scared! But he grabbed me and said "You won't go through this alone. We are going to beat this thing together!"

We decided not to tell anyone, not even our children until we knew what we were dealing with. But when we canceled our daughter's college visit they knew something was up. They got scared, and didn't know what to be scared about.

On the day before Thanksgiving we got the news. My surgeon called from the hospital. "I'm sorry to have to give you this news over the phone, but I'm needed in surgery and I didn't want you to go through the holiday weekend wondering. You have breast cancer, and you will need more surgery. I'm so sorry." The roaring was back. I couldn't speak. Mark, next to me with the other phone, thanked the doctor and hung up. Then he held me as we cried.

It was time to tell our children - no longer children, really, but young adults, high school students, old enough to understand. We shared my diagnosis telling them everything we could, everything we knew. We held each other, we cried, we talked, we cried some more. Teenage boys don't know how to cry - my son Nick hid in the corner of the couch until I gathered him into my arms and held him. I tried to be open to both of them in the weeks that fol-

lowed, offering to share information and my feelings with them. Mary wanted to know lots of details, what would happen to me, where would I be, when. She insisted on being with us the day I had surgery. Nick was quieter, kept more inside. I talked to him when I thought he wanted me too—sometimes a mother just guesses. The day of my surgery Nick went to school and came to see me afterwards.

I didn't mind losing my breast - I just wanted the cancer gone. I had a modified radical mastectomy of the right breast with chemotherapy to follow. I had a diagnosis and a course of treatment. I had a plan and many doctors who would help me through it all. The roaring receded again. Someone gave me the best possible advice very early in my journey - "just look at the next step and concentrate on making it through that one thing."

Meanwhile Mark and the kids had work, school, and lives to live. That's when our friends stepped in, picked us up, and carried us along. It is a humbling thing to be cared for by others not because you ask, but because you need. Rides, food (lots of food, we had teenagers!), prayers and support surrounded us in layers of caring.

Mark did everything else. Mark listened to doctors when I couldn't, cried when I couldn't, held me when I could. Mark stayed home long enough to see the kids in the morning and got home in time to fix supper, somehow working in between. Mark, as always, was my rock, my support, my best friend.

Then the treatments, the hospital vis-

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*continued...*

its, the tests are over, and your doctor says “You’re finished – enjoy life again!” How do you go back to your life? Some people say that’s the hardest part of all. I didn’t jump right back into a full life of living. It happened slowly, one day at a time. Sometimes it seemed like I would never get my energy back. I was tired for so long! I spent so much time on the couch Mark wanted to dedicate that end “The Donna Dettman Memorial Dent!”

But one day I picked myself up off the couch and began a new part of my life’s journey, one of searching and discovery within myself. Four months after I finished chemotherapy I met a friend for coffee. We decided to work through a book together, with exercises on creativity. We met weekly at a coffee shop to discuss what we had read. I began to write! It was kind of like pulling a plug out of a dam or a dike and watching the water pour forth. Writing for no one but myself I discovered a delight in the written word I never knew. For years I had been creating and telling stories in performance but this was different. Writing became a way to connect with my deepest thoughts, feelings and fears.

I started spending time just sitting quietly, reflecting, and watching the world around me. I began to walk and discovered a spot on the river to sit and watch the bugs skitter across the water, listened to the honking geese. I watched the leaves turn yellow and gold in the fall. Then I went in winter to see the brown, sleeping trees lined with white snow.

That winter I went shopping and discovered color in the clothing stores too! I bought a yellow top, and every time I wore it I felt happy. So I started buying more clothes in bright colors; pink, yellow, spring green, turquoise blue. In fact, I now think it is an act of defiance to wear my lacy lavender Victoria’s Secret bra to my oncologist for my checkup. He doesn’t see it, of course, or any of my clothes. All he sees are my underpants – and sometimes those are red!

The first spring after I finished chemotherapy was like a miracle to me. I delighted in watching the world come back to life, perhaps because I was coming back to life as well. There is a joy in green, living things for me that last all summer long.

So far I’ve figured out a few things:

- Cancer is never over. For me, it will always be there, it will never go away. As time goes on the fear sinks deeper and deeper, and sometimes almost disappears under a whole lot of joy and happiness. But the least little ache, pain or lump can bring that fear roaring back up to the surface like a speeding train.
- My old life won’t do. I can never go back. Because I’m different now – a different person in a different place.

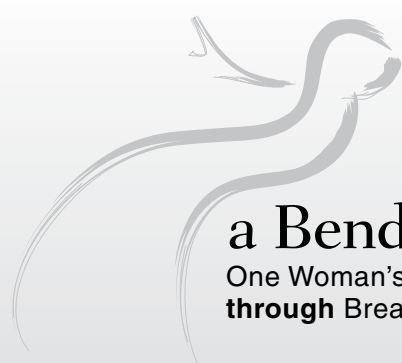
It’s almost as if all that time on the couch was like hibernation for me. As the trees and plants sleep all winter gathering strength to come alive again in the spring, I slept and gathered strength too. All that sitting and watching taught me that sometimes it’s okay to sit, that watching life is something worth doing. It has been an interesting journey, and I am excited to see what’s around the next bend. Dare to expect joy in your life! ➤

*Donna has been wowing audiences since 1990 with her tales of life, love, and laughter. Her zany folksongs and haunting ballads add a touch of the old-time troubadour. Heroes and heroines outwit their foes with pluck, ingenuity, and sometimes a little bit of magic. Now Donna brings*

*that magic to a new program that explores an illness that touches people around the world.*

*Donna’s journey with breast cancer began in November 2001. Recovery has been a physical and emotional struggle, but also brought a renewed awareness of how precious life truly is. A Bend in the Road shares that new-found optimism and positive thinking with others. Her 4-1/2 years as a breast cancer survivor and her 20 years of presentation experience combine for a dynamic and compelling program.*

*Donna lives with her husband Mark on the western edge of Chicagoland. Their two children, Mary and Nick, drop in occasionally between college semesters and other adventures. She can be reached at [donnatell@comcast.net](mailto:donnatell@comcast.net)*



### a Bend in the Road

One Woman’s Journey  
through Breast Cancer

**Special Event and Reception**  
October 21 at 7:00 p.m.

Outpatient Pavilion, Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital  
Route 22, Barrington  
(west of the Route 14 & Route 22 intersection)

Donna Dettman, a seasoned performance artist and breast cancer survivor shares insights, both humorous and poignant, in her one-woman show.

A wine and hors d’oeuvre reception in the pavilion will follow the 60-minute performance. Donna will be available after the program to converse and answer questions.  
Tickets are a \$50 donation per person.  
Call the Barrington Area Arts Council at 847-382-5626 for reservations; seating is limited.

presented by the Barrington Area Arts Council  
in partnership with Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital  
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