

In April 2003, at just 28 years old, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. We had no family history and at such a young age no reason to suspect that cancer was creeping into our lives. I underwent a lumpectomy, chemotherapy, radiation and reconstruction all while being a single mother of 2 children. I had a wonderful support team through my family and friends and found life after a cancer diagnosis.

In 2007, I had a reoccurrence at 32 years old. As devastated as I was, I knew I had to once again fight. This time I underwent a bi-lateral mastectomy, chemotherapy and later reconstruction.

While on my second journey, I felt that God had a purpose for my diagnosis. With encouragement from my family and friends, I reached out to other local, young breast cancer survivors. I wanted to help others, raise awareness that young women were being diagnosed and to raise funds for organizations supporting survivors.

In 2008 I met eight other local survivors that shared a common connection. We each had our own unique stories and found strength in one another. One woman in particular, Norma Zimmer, shared my desire to help others. Together we organized a fundraiser in hopes to raise money for local organizations and non-profits. We then realized there was a need in the Erie community for an organization that supports local patients and raises awareness that younger women were being diagnosed with this disease. In the latter half of 2008 Linked By Pink was founded. We began the process of becoming a 501(C)(3) organization. We developed a Board of Directors, held monthly support meetings, organized various fundraisers, developed medical and transportation grants and supported other local organizations.

While on my own journey with breast cancer, I found strength in these women and found a sisterhood that I never expected. I found friendships that will last a lifetime and heartbreaks when a sister has been taken too soon. I feel that my diagnosis was almost a blessing because Linked By Pink has assisted so many women in the Erie community that otherwise might not have found one another or financial and emotional assistance.

In 2013, I resigned from my position with Linked By Pink and relocated to Central Florida with family. Last April (2018), I returned to the Erie area and became active within the organization. While I was away, I was amazed at how LBP continued to grow and assist those diagnosed as well as their families.

I would have never imagined that 10 years ago, a small idea of raising awareness would grow into what Linked By Pink has become today and that it would touch so many lives in so many ways. I have met so many incredible and inspiring people along this journey and look forward to carrying on the mission of Linked By Pink.

~Heather Stempka
Founder & Executive Director
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