



Hope, Humor, Happiness – A Young Breast Cancer Survivor’s Five-Year Journey Into Motherhood

Life couldn’t get much better. I had been married to a wonderful man, Jorge, for two years. We had just decided it was time to start a family – which is what I had been dreaming about for as far back as I can remember. It was August 1999. I booked a full medical examination in joyous anticipation of getting pregnant. Instead, the day before my physical was scheduled, I found a lump in my breast.

Because I was only 32, it took me over two months to get an appointment for a mammogram. Three agonizing months since I first found the lump, the final diagnosis was finally in – it was cancer. On November 8, I had a mastectomy, reconstructive surgery, and a lymph node biopsy. A device was inserted into my chest in preparation for chemotherapy. The ordeal was nearly over.

But then the oncologist gave us a crushing blow; chemotherapy could do permanent damage to my ovaries. He encouraged us to consult Dr. Lawrence Werlin, Founder and Medical Director of Coastal Fertility Medical Center in Irvine, Calif. about having my eggs harvested and frozen.

There was a great sense of urgency surrounding this appointment because I would have to start chemotherapy soon. If Jorge and I were ever to have the children we had longed for, my eggs would have to be harvested immediately. Four days later, we met with Dr. Werlin.

I simply do not have the words to describe our wonderful Dr. Werlin. First, picture Einstein in a Rolling Stones T-shirt. (The Werl, as he’s affectionately known, listens to nothing but the Stones at his Orange County clinic.) Dr. Werlin has an incredible way of encompassing everything about a woman in his care. He gave us hope; we decided to have our inseminated eggs frozen for the future – just in case.

Six days later, Jorge began to inject me daily with hormones to prepare my ovaries for the great egg harvest of 1999. In the middle of my menstrual cycle, The Werl called to say that the following day was egg day. While I was under general anesthetic, having 16 of my eggs retrieved with Dr. Werlin’s tiny little vacuum cleaner, my husband was in another room doing “his thing.” The retrieval and fertilization process was a success. The Werl froze our resulting 11 embryos.

Two days later, December 1999, I began chemotherapy. I finished my various treatments in December 2001. In January 2002, I was nominated to be a torchbearer when the Olympic Torch Relay came through Los Angeles County. Physically, I was exhausted, but I managed to run nearly a mile. Somehow, the relay seemed symbolic; though my race hadn’t yet been won, the relay marked a turning point on my road to recovery.

For 18 months, Jorge and I tried to conceive the old-fashioned way, but nothing happened. We became anxious. The spontaneity was being taken out of what was supposed to be a wonderful experience. We decided to go back to The Werl to discuss our situation. He was extremely mindful of my medical history. A very humane scientist, Dr. Werlin presented our choices objectively, and with genuine compassion.

We decided on a frozen embryo transfer; it would expose me to the least amount of medication. Transfer day, April 1, 2004, was surreal. So different from a normal conception. I was “conceiving,” but I couldn’t even see my husband! We were edgy and jumpy – yet we were so elated. Dr. Werlin gave us something we were not expecting – a picture of our microscopic embryos. We could see these overlapping circles and I thought, gosh, how beautiful! I was awake, watching onscreen while Dr. Werlin did the transfer. I’ll never forget hearing his booming voice shout “Beatriz Sandoval! Get pregnant.” The transfer was a success.

Lately, I’ve had the opportunity to tell my story, and I’m honored to be an advocate for women, educating them about their options. It’s important for me to express that having cancer doesn’t have to be a drama on the high seas; a diagnosis of cancer is not a death sentence.

After nine months and 21 hours of tickling her mother’s tummy, Sofia Margarita was born, sunny-side-up, on December 26, 2004. We couldn’t stop kissing her. Or crying – for the sheer joy of this amazing miracle. Sofia remains a symbol of hope in our family.