

MOMS WHO ROCK

# WE FACED



# CANCER—AND

# WON!

BY ERIN ZAMMETT RUDDY  
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**THESE TEN WOMEN ARE AMONG THE THOUSANDS DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER EACH YEAR.** They caught it, fought it, and so far, they're beating it. Let their incredible stories inspire you to take charge of your health, too—you're NOT too busy for a checkup!

**H**ead-banging to Nirvana, sipping Champagne, and rockin' impossibly high heels may not be the first images that come to mind when you hear "moms with cancer," but that's exactly what went down when ten survivors got together for this photo shoot back in July. I can't imagine what the makeup artists were thinking as we sat in their chairs dishing about what type of antinausea meds we took, who kept their wig, and what's worse—chemo brain or mommy brain? In addition to all the air guitar and laughter, there were tears as we recalled the tough times—like trying to put on a happy face for our children when we were tired and sick—and the worries that still plague even the most optimistic of us.

As an almost 11-year survivor, I was the veteran of the group. In 2001, when I was 23, I was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia, a form of blood cancer that traditional chemotherapy and radiation do little to stop. I may never be cured, but I take a pill that keeps my cancer in remission with

almost no side effects. I had to take a pretty ginormous risk and suspend that treatment to have my two children, Alex, 5, and Nora, 2½. Now every morning we all take our "vitamins" together, only mine, which essentially keeps me alive, isn't shaped like Fred Flintstone.

The frightening fact is, thousands of young women get diagnosed with some form of cancer every year, and many of them have children. It's Breast Cancer Awareness Month, so we're hearing a lot about that disease right now—I in 8 women will get it. But there are so many other varieties of cancer affecting women, too. We hope our stories inspire you to never put your health on the back burner, no matter how crazy life gets—karate-practice carpools, IMs from your boss, and all. Every one of us feels incredibly lucky (yeah, weird word choice but so true) to have found our cancer when we did (mine was discovered in a routine blood test at my annual physical). Because of it, our kids still have their mothers. Pretty awesome mothers, if we may say so, at that!

Grab a hankie! These women have a lifesaving message. Download our Parenting Live app and watch!





## MEET KRISTEN

Casillo, 36, is a legal personnel manager



### TYPE OF CANCER:

Breast cancer

### DIAGNOSED AT 35

**MOM TO:** Sophia, 4, and Nicholas, 1 year

“My treatment, which included getting a double mastectomy and thirty rounds of radiation, was so intense there was just no way I could do it alone. We put our house on the market and moved in with my parents. My mom took a leave of absence from work to care for my kids. After my double mastectomy, I couldn’t pick up Nicholas for six weeks. It makes me cry just thinking about it. But having kids and cancer at the same time means there’s no time for a pity party. I had to do everything I could to ensure that I would be here to raise my kids. Taking control of your health is not selfish—you do it for your children’s sake.”

## MEET MELISSA

Gonzalez, 36, is an accountant



### TYPE OF CANCER:

Hodgkin’s lymphoma

### DIAGNOSED AT 27

**MOM TO:** Andrew, 9, Gregory, 4, and Sofia, 15 months

“The only thing I ever wanted in life was to have a

delivered, then after birth I needed more chemo and radiation, which could have made me infertile. In hopes of protecting my eggs, I took a drug that put me in temporary menopause. When I relapsed ten months later and needed a stem cell transplant that was sure to leave me infertile, my husband and I scrambled to freeze embryos. Knowing I had them to fall back on helped keep me sane during those long weeks. Then, about seven months post-transplant, I got my period again. After years of trying, my son Gregory and then my daughter, Sofia, were born. Having cancer made me determined to have the big family I had always dreamed of. And as a thank-you to science for saving my life, my husband and I donated the embryos we didn’t use to stem cell research.”

## MEET JEN

Singer, 45, is an author, blogger, and founder of [parentingwithcancer.com](http://parentingwithcancer.com)



### TYPE OF CANCER:

Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma

### DIAGNOSED AT 40

**MOM TO:** Nicholas, 15, and Christopher, 14

“Having children gave me great strength to fight

# MOMS DIAGNOSED WHILE PREGNANT



Sold her house and moved in with her parents

cancer. I felt like something was trying to take my kids’ mom away, and damnit, I wouldn’t let it. We just hunkered down and set our sights on remission, which required me to have six rounds of chemo, followed by five weeks of radiation. Even if I spent much of the day sleeping on the couch and being generally useless, my boys seemed at peace when I was home. I’d spent much of the first month in a hospital 30 miles from home, so they didn’t see me much then. I guess not being there was more upsetting than seeing me nap, bald and drooling, on the couch. My kids taught me that cancer might change how you feel and how you look, but you’ll always be their mother. I experienced severe bone pain from the white-blood-cell boosters; it would make me drop

## DO THIS FOR YOUR KIDS!

Sign and share our Moms’ Be Smart, Be Healthy Pledge at [parenting.com/cancerpledge](http://parenting.com/cancerpledge).

For everyone’s sake, take care of your health.

- ✓ Get an annual pelvic exam.
- ✓ Get a Pap smear every two years (or more often if recommended).
- ✓ Do monthly breast self-exams.
- ✓ Get a clinical breast exam and a mammogram annually after age 40 (or younger if recommended). If you’re under 40, get a clinical breast exam every three years.
- ✓ Wear sunscreen and check moles regularly.
- ✓ Quit smoking. Avoid secondhand smoke.

## “CANCER MADE ME DETERMINED TO HAVE THE BIG FAMILY I’D DREAMED OF.”

family. Cancer tried to take that away from me, but I wouldn’t let it. I was seven months pregnant when I was diagnosed. I had to have chemo even before I

ON JEN R.: DRESS (KOHLE’S), GRAY TIGHTS (AMERICAN APPAREL), BOOTS (RESTRICTED); SCARF (D&Y), GLOVES (CUFF COULTURE), ON DEBBY F.: LC BY LAUREN CONTRAD (KOHLE’S), REISS SHIRT (BLOOMINGDALE’S), SHORTS (H&M), CALVIN KLEIN SHOES (BLOOMINGDALE’S), JEWELRY (BEN-AMUN), ON JACIE: DRESS (H&M), SAM EDELMAN SHOES (BLOOMINGDALE’S), ON KRISTEN: SHIRT (H&M), SKIRT (GANE RAMSAY), BOOTS (PAYLESS), BRANDY PHAM BRACELETS (HELLO LOVELYO), EARRINGS (BEN-AMUN).

to my knees with no notice. Once, it hit me right in front of the kids. They shouted to their dad for help while I tried to get up to my feet and show them I was OK. I tried to explain that the pain actually meant the medicine was working. I know that image has stayed with them for years, but all I can do is continue to show them that I am healthy now.”

## MEET JACIE

**Brandes, 41, is group associate publisher of Parenting**



**TYPE OF CANCER:** Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma  
**DIAGNOSED AT 32**  
**MOM TO:** Grace, 8

“Everyone told me I must be so tired and breathless because I was pregnant, but I knew it had to be more than that. When I got diagnosed, I was told that chemo couldn't

wait till after the birth. My OB said, ‘Let me break this down for you—the baby can't live if you don't live.’ I was like, ‘Right, OK, game on!’ That was the exact moment when I became a mom. I felt completely responsible for another life. I felt that she was going to survive and she was going to be fine. We named her Grace because by the grace of God, we knew she was going to be OK. And she is. Grace knows I was sick—she's seen all the photos and my radiation scars. (Eventually, I had a stem cell transplant, too.) She's curious. I don't believe in lying or dodging her questions, so I answer them directly with the minimum amount of info she needs to understand. I don't go into a ton of detail; I just explain that I had a disease and worked hard to get rid of it. Whenever Grace sees pictures of me in my wig, she's always like, ‘Mom, that wig was so awful!’ But

“My right breast hurt, so I had a mammogram. It turned out that my right breast was fine—but my left one had cancer. I was fortunate: The cancer hadn't spread. But I still needed to have a mastectomy (I opted for a double) and reconstructive surgery. The whole thing was painful and grueling. And my situation was unique—right as I was diagnosed, my younger sister, Emily, who'd struggled with her own breast cancer for years, was dying. My first week I was up and around, Emily passed away at 37. That was when the tough questions started, particularly from my younger daughter, Genie, who was five years old at the time. She'd ask repeatedly if I was going to get as sick as Emily had been. I'd explain that I was pretty certain I was going to be fine. I'd say, ‘Do you understand what I'm saying?’ and she'd nod. Then I'd ask, ‘Do you believe me,

## MEET JEN

**Rogers, 39, is a journalist**



**TYPE OF CANCER:** Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma  
**DIAGNOSED AT 34**  
**MOM TO:** James, 8, Cassie, 5; currently pregnant with her “post-cancer bonus baby”

“I'm pretty much like any other mom except I get a little weepier at my kids' milestones. I used to sit in the chemo chair—I had to have six rounds of chemotherapy treatment in all—and wonder ‘Am I ever going to see the first day of kindergarten?’ So when that happens, it's very overwhelming. But it's good to have those reality checks along the way to remind you to enjoy the little moments. The further away you get from it, the harder it is to remember you had cancer. That's one of the reasons I stay involved through my volunteer work with the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. I'm still meeting and talking with people who are in the trenches. It's also a good way to remind my kids that I am a survivor. I told them what was going on right away, but they were young. At some point they're going to realize, yeah, cancer kills a lot of people and it's really bad and my mom had it. I don't want it to be some shocking event. My nightmare was always that some kid in the playground would say ‘Your mom has cancer.’ My oldest was only three years old, but I wanted him to know so he could say ‘Yeah, I know that. What's the big deal?’ I have a photo of me bald that I keep with all of our other family photos. It reminds me to not get too lazy in the way I'm behaving as a person and as a mother and to not take everything for granted.”

**“I HAD ALL THE EXCUSES TO NOT SEE MY DOCTOR—I'M A SINGLE MOM, I'M WORKING, I'M TOO BUSY...”**



The bravest single mom we've ever met

as honest as I try to be with her, for now I've chosen not to use the word ‘cancer.’ I don't think she'll understand what it means, and when she repeats it, it sounds a lot scarier than it really needs to be.”

## MEET DEBBIE

**Skolnik, 45, is a senior editor at Parenting**



**TYPE OF CANCER:** Breast cancer  
**DIAGNOSED AT 41**  
**MOM TO:** Clara, 12, and Genie, 8

baby bear?’ and she'd shake her head and burst into tears. “Despite my sister's experience, I hadn't had a mammogram in five years. Watching what was happening to Emily was so scary and preoccupying. I didn't want to look behind the curtain at my own health. But when I finally did, it saved my life. I had this feeling like I had decided to take an earlier boat instead of the *Titanic*, and just escaped a major disaster. My cancer wasn't a single lump—it was a bunch of tiny specks I would have never been able to feel on my own. The mammogram found a needle in a haystack—wouldn't you want to know about your needle in a haystack when you can still easily do something about it?”

NICOLE BY NICOLE MILLER SHOES (COPENNEY), EARRINGS (BEN-PRINCESS VERA BRACELET (KOHLS), ON MELISSA DRESS JUICY COUTURE CUFF (ZAPPPOS).

ON JEN'S SHIRT (KOHLS), SEVENFORALL MANKIND JEANS (BLOOMINGDALE'S), AMUN) ON DEBBIE'S DRESS (H&M), JOAN AND DAVID SHOES (BLOOMINGDALE'S), (MICHAEL KORS), SAM EDELMAN SHOES (BLOOMINGDALE'S), TIGHTS (KOHLS).



# MOMS ON A MISSION



## 9 REASONS TO BOOK THAT DOCTOR'S APPOINTMENT TODAY!

1. You'll feel better once the date's penciled in.
2. You CAN afford it! The National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program provides breast and cervical cancer screenings to women who can't afford them. Visit [parenting.com/freescreenings](http://parenting.com/freescreenings).
3. You'll set the right example for your family.
4. You'll create a stronger doctor-patient bond.
5. Your doctor needs updates on your family's health, too. "If a close relative has developed a disease, such as colon cancer, you may need to be screened sooner than she'd normally suggest," says Monya De, M.D., a Los Angeles internist.
6. Your fears will likely be calmed! Take breast cancer: "For every lump you can feel, 90 percent of the time it isn't malignant," says Linnea Chap, M.D., a breast-cancer specialist at Beverly Hills Cancer Center.
7. You'll learn what you SHOULD be worried about. "I help my patients understand the cancer risks that rise and fall through different phases of their lives," says Lawrence Wagman, M.D., executive medical director for the St. Joseph Hospital Center for Cancer Prevention and Treatment, in Orange, CA.
8. Lots of cancers are curable—IF THEY'RE CAUGHT EARLY.
9. Read #8 again.

### MEET DEBBI

*Scheulen, 44, was an insurance adjuster*

**TYPE OF CANCER:** Anaplastic large-cell lymphoma  
**DIAGNOSED AT 41**  
**MOM TO:** Alex, 13



"It took me about six months before I got off my butt and dealt with the spots on my skin and the tumor on the back of my thigh that I kept insisting was a cyst. I had all

absolutely used the word 'cancer.' We're all each other has and I didn't want to dance around it. And anyway, my treatment—six rounds of chemo, then radiation—was going to make me lose my hair, so he was going to figure it out eventually. I was determined to still do what I had to do. People wanted to help me cook and clean my house, but I told them that was my reason to get out of bed every day. I would say, 'If you want to do something for me, just come visit me, hang out and keep me company. Cancer

it's going to be spent with my child. I'm there when he wakes up, and I'm there when he gets home from school. I don't want him to look back and say, 'Hey, my mom was great because she worked her fingers to the bone to support me.' I want him to remember me being there every day. My biggest priority used to be providing for him, but I've stopped trying to keep up with everyone else. We have Social Security disability insurance, and combined with child support, we get by. Sadly, we're

**"YOU NEED TO BE A LITTLE SELFISH WHEN YOU HAVE CANCER. IF SOMETHING IS GOOD FOR YOU, IT'S GOOD FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY."**

the excuses to not see my doctor: I'm a single mom, I was working, I didn't have time, it would go away. Once I got diagnosed, telling my son was hard, but I

rearranges your priorities 100 percent. I went back to working over 40 hours a week, but it was too much. If I have a year left, five years, ten years, whatever it is,

also supplemented with food stamps. But my son has a nice place to live, he's getting a good education and three square meals a day, and, most important of all, he has me."

# MOMS STILL IN TREATMENT



## MEET STEPHANIE

Wood, 50, is executive editor of Parenting

**TYPE OF CANCER:** Breast cancer  
**DIAGNOSED AT 46**  
**MOM TO:** Matilda, 17, Anthony, 15, and Charlie, 11



"I am an eternal optimist, so I never thought something like this could happen to me. I had never been in a hospital except to give birth. But right before I was diagnosed, I had become stressed and exhausted. I blamed it on taking care of my mother, who was at the end of a long battle with endometrial cancer. I had really put myself on the back burner, even more

than usual. So I blamed the way I was feeling on all of that, but finally my husband insisted I go to the doctor. He even made the appointment for me! It turned out I had developed hypothyroidism, which is why I could barely get myself out of bed. But I also had something else. The nurse-practitioner conducting my physical felt a thickening in my breast and sent me for an ultrasound and biopsy. If I hadn't had the thyroid problem, who knows when I would have found the cancer. It was in the lobes of my breast, which is harder to detect with self-exams, so I doubt I would have discovered it on my own. I went for the biopsy, but, again, being a glass-half-full kind of person, I was so sure it would be nothing that I didn't even remember to call the doctor for my results. Ultimately, they found five different spots of cancer in my breast. I had a mastectomy, chemo, and reconstruction, and am taking Tamoxifen. It's been four years, and I'm now cancer-free, but if my husband hadn't insisted I go to the doctor, who knows where I'd be right now."

## MEET KATIE

Speyer is a 31-year-old oncology nurse

**TYPE OF CANCER:** Salivary gland tumor  
**DIAGNOSED AT 30**  
**MOM TO:** Jack, 14 months



"I had six and a half weeks of head and neck radiation. I'd be strapped down with a mask pushing on my face, screwed to the table. Grown men would refuse the treatment. It was a horror show, but knowing I had to be there for Jack gave me strength. I wanted his life to be normal and happy.

"I'm still trying to pull something positive from this experience. I'm starting to realize that humans are so resilient. Somewhere deep inside us is the instinct to survive. To be able to move on. To be able to find joy in life again. I'm not there yet, but I can see it on the horizon. I guess I'm even stronger than I thought."

**ERIN ZAMMETT RUDDY** is a mom of two and has a blog, *Mom Without a Filter*, on parenting.com.

**Styling:** Sabrina James **Market Editor:** Robin Page **Makeup:** Brett Jackson for Sarah Laird assisted by Mari Schten & Keila Rivera **Hair:** Hair by Mel Paldino assisted by Meaghan Masterson and Natalie Cardona for ENNIS INC.



## LOOK WHO ELSE SAID YOU-KNOW-WHAT TO CANCER!

These high-powered moms wanted to share something with you:



Diagnosed with ovarian cancer at 33

**Shannon Miller, 34, Olympic gold medalist in gymnastics**

**MOM TO:** Rocco, almost 3

"It's really important to shout from the rooftops and tell women that we have to make our health a priority. We're so busy taking care of everyone else, and we have to make that time for ourselves, too. It's not a selfless act—it's a very selfless act. If we don't take time for our health, then we won't be here for our kids and our family and everyone else."



Diagnosed with breast cancer at 41

**Debbie Wasserman Schultz, 45, U.S. Rep. for Florida's 20th congressional district, chair of the Democratic National Committee**

**MOM TO:** Rebecca and Jake, both 13, and Shelby, 9

"I have double reminders of what I've been through [a double mastectomy]. But we just had my twins' bar and bat mitzvah, and everything is more poignant and sweet. Every milestone you can be there for, you can't help but think, it might not have been."



Diagnosed with cervical cancer at 27

**Marissa Jaret Winokur, 39, Tony Award-winning singer/actress/dancer, currently starring in Retired at 35**

**MOM TO:** Zev, 4

"I don't regret having cancer, because then Zev [Winokur's son conceived through a surrogate, since she'd had a hysterectomy] wouldn't be Zev. I'm so grateful for who he is, and a lot of who he is is how he came to us. There are so many ways to be a mother if you want to be."