

Hope & Inspiration

Alumna's 'Breastless in the City' book chronicles her real-life tragedy-to-triumph story

At the age of 26, she lost her husband in a car accident. At 31, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. But through it all, Cathy Stuart Bueti, '91, was a survivor, and now she's sharing her inspirational story of overcoming tragedy in a new book called "Breastless in the City."

"I hope people will be able to take away from this book that awful things can happen, but it doesn't mean you won't be OK," she says. "You can survive and get through things."

Bueti graduated from College Misericordia with a degree in occupational therapy. Two years earlier the Rockland County, N.Y. native had become engaged to high school sweetheart, Paul Lisanti, and in 1992 they married and were living in Warwick, N.Y. But a month before their two-year anniversary, tragedy struck when Lisanti and his 18-year-old brother were killed in a car accident.

"It was so surreal, like it couldn't be happening," Bueti says. "It was almost like I couldn't process it. Then feeling this numbness and shock. It almost doesn't feel real."

She would soon go back to work as a therapist in the head trauma unit at Helen Hayes Hospital in West Haverstraw, N.Y, which she says, helped her from staying in bed all day. Bueti routinely worked with victims of car accidents, both a frequent stark reminder of what happened to her husband, and a window into the life Lisanti possibly could have spent disabled or in a coma.

Family and friends provided comfort, but it would be years before Bueti felt she was beginning to create a new life for herself.

"It's hard to get back into your life, because it feels like your whole life was destroyed and you don't know what your life is supposed to be anymore," she says.

In time Bueti began seeking out the things that brought her happiness. She took a photography class and a writing workshop. Eventually she ventured into online dating and meeting new people. But in 2001, she found a lump in her breast.

"I had that awful thing happen to me when Paul died, and I thought 'How can I possibly be dealing with another horrible thing?' It almost didn't seem possible," she says.

At first her doctors told her that given her young age it was unlikely she had breast cancer. But when a mammogram and biopsy confirmed otherwise, her first thought was that she was going to die. She was faced with overwhelming decisions and doctor appointments. Things looked bleak, but she was determined to hold onto her life. She kept working, and found a new connection with her patients, learning what it was like to be one herself. She also kept trying to do the things she loved, and kept dating.

"I was trying to have some sense of what was the normal part of my life," she explains. "Even if you meet someone that likes you, you're going to have to drop this bomb on them. Why even put yourself out there? But I wanted to hold on to the part of my life that made sense."

Bald from chemotherapy and with a breast that needed reconstruction, Bueti's self-esteem was low. She found herself with a man who treated her poorly, and assured her that no one else would want her. After ending that relationship, she thought her prospects of falling in love were slim.

But then, a year after she began treatment, she met Lou Bueti. He had recently lost his mother to breast cancer and understood what Cathy was going through. He was kind, and he was by her side for doctor appointments. In May of 2003, they married.

Now Cathy Bueti has been free of cancer for nearly six years. With her husband's encouragement, she began writing about her experience in 2005 — a difficult process of facing things she didn't want to remember.

"There were a lot of tears in writing the book, but it was also very healing," Bueti says.

Cleveland Clinic Press published "Breastless in the City" in October, and the book details what Bueti calls a journey of her soul that she hopes will bring hope, and awareness.

"In addition to providing support and hope for others to know they can survive, I also hope that it will encourage other young women to be more proactive about their health. If they find a lump, get it checked, and not think they are too young to get breast cancer. I want to be an example of that. If it is caught early enough the survival rate is much better."

Cathy and Lou Bueti dance on their wedding day.

