

Sharon Helen Lees 22/12/1968-24/5/2016



Shazza's story

Hi everyone my name is Sharon and I am a breast cancer survivor and would like to share my story with you...

In October 2007 life was going great I was married to a wonderful man, I had 2 great stepchildren and 1 beautiful little boy almost 2 years old. We had been trying for another baby and after numerous trips to the doctor and negative pregnancy tests I was wondering why my left breast was so tender to touch if I wasn't pregnant. I had mentioned the word "breast cancer" to the doctor and he basically laughed and said that tenderness wasn't a sign of breast cancer.

A couple of weeks later I noticed a change in shape and dimpling of my left breast so I immediately went back to the doctor. After a full breast check, he said I think you are right to be concerned as I can feel a lump and I want you to book in for a mammogram and ultrasound this week! I was very shocked.

The ultrasound and mammogram was done the next day and they immediately did a biopsy, which worried me a lot.

Although everyone was saying it would be OK and it wouldn't be anything serious, I just had a bad feeling, but I was still hopeful. The main thing that scared me was the thought of not being able to watch my baby boy grow up and him not having a Mum!

Three long days later my husband and I attended my GP for the results of the biopsy. I had prepared myself for the worst but unfortunately my husband hadn't. The GP said those dreaded words it is 'cancer'. CANCER a word that up until that day I couldn't even really say – It's such a horrible word. But unfortunately I had Breast Cancer and the only thing I could do was accept it and move forward to the next step of surgery.

Of course a diagnosis like this affects the whole family, but in a weird way it was easier for me deal with because it was me and not another member of my family.

After 2 lumpectomies and finally a mastectomy I came out of hospital the day before my little boy's 2nd Birthday just in time to celebrate with my family!

I started 6 chemo treatments a few days after Christmas and completed them 6 months later. The most demoralizing thing for me was losing my hair but my husband was a great support even when at night when I would take off my bandana, prosthesis and makeup and I felt very ugly he said to me "my wife is here" and he pointed to his eyes. This comment brought tears to my eyes and is something special I will always remember.

Two weeks after my last chemo I started 6 weeks of radiation, which involved a lot of my skin being burnt and was very painful but it did heal quite quickly once the treatment ended.

Well life went back to normal for me in 2008 - I returned to my full time job in September and worked really hard, as it was an extremely busy job and very demanding.

Life was going quite nicely until January 2011 when I developed a persistent cough that would not go away. After 3 trips to the GP over a couple of weeks I was finally sent for a chest XRay which they thought showed something up on the left so then I was sent for a CT scan.

My husband and I went to the GP for the results on 19 January 2011 and couldn't believe our ears when he said that the spot on the left was OK but they have found "Cancer" in my second rib under my collarbone. My god you could have knocked us down with a feather – we couldn't believe it! We were in so much shock the next month or so it is really a bit of a blur taken up with doctors' appointments and tests.

The first breast cancer diagnosis was bad enough but being early breast cancer everyone is very positive and there was only a low risk of it coming back as secondary breast cancer. But this time we have been told that they cannot cure me and cannot operate as the cancer spot is a seed from the first breast cancer and it likely that it has seeded in other parts of my body and will appear at some time in the future!

My Oncologist organised for me to have my ovaries out (so the hormones couldn't feed the cancer) and changed my medication. I also completed 10 days of radiation because I was beginning to feel some pain in my shoulder.

So I have secondary breast cancer. I can't blame anything in particular – maybe having my 1st baby when I was 36, having a very stressful job or maybe lack of sleep. Who knows but amazingly there have been some positives out of my diagnosis.

I got to watch my son start school in 2011 and help with his class reading groups, pick him up every day and spend a lot of time with him and my husband who was working from home at the time. I was going to the gym at least 3 times a week for yoga, Pilates and zumba classes. I did a meditation course, which really helps me deal with my situation. We had a family holiday to Queensland, quite a number of weekends away and business trips away with my husband and also lots of shopping (much to my husband's horror). My life is very full and I am very happy that I have got to fulfil my dream of being a housewife!

Unfortunately more cancer spots appeared in my bones in 2013 and I had to go through chemotherapy again to try and slow the cancer growth. So I lost my hair again!! I also had radiation treatment in June 2014, which made me very sick and hospitalised me for a few days. I haven't been able to exercise as much as I used to but I still try and fit in a walk every day with my dog and attend a yoga class once a week.

As a hobby I sell ENVY Jewellery and MICHE Handbags in ladies homes and I also started using a natural and organic skincare which I am very enthusiastic about and share with my family and friends. I think I am born to sell!!

I do some volunteer work for a young family that needs assistance for a couple of hours a week and I am an Ambassador for NBCF. I like to share my story so we can raise money for research into breast cancer.

Research is the most effective way for NBCF to reach our goal of zero deaths from breast cancer by 2030. In 1994, 30 per cent of women diagnosed with breast cancer passed away from the disease. In 2014 this percentage has halved. The work is far from over and we are now committed, to the next 20 years of striving towards our goal.

Another dream besides being a housewife that I have got to fulfilled is becoming a Nanna. My Stepson and his girlfriend had a gorgeous little girl and I am already very much in love with her!

A lot of people have said to me that I am the strongest person they know. I don't know about that but my attitude is that I am not going to sit at home and waste any of my life, I am going to get out there and do as much as I can and make lots of great memories.

I have got a lot of support from my family and friends. There are way too many people going through this terrible experience but hopefully I can make everyone more aware that you should listen to your body and keep on to those doctors.

Thank you for listening and I am always happy to share my story and talk to anyone that I might be able to help.

The last thing I would like to say to everyone is ENJOY YOUR LIFE – I KNOW I AM !!!!

Sharon's Eulogy (Given by her husband)

For the past 11 years I have been the proud husband of Sharon Helen Lees.

It is my honour to speak to you today about my beautiful wife. As all of you are aware Sharon passed recently after an 8 year battle with breast cancer. But I ask you, please do not define Sharon as a victim of cancer. I ask you to think of her as the beautiful, fun, strong, confident, impatient, pushy, selfless, proud, loyal, inspirational, loving person that she was. Sharon planned her service today and she asked us to ensure that it is a celebration of her life, so for the moment please try to forget how she died and focus on how she lived and the love that she gave to you.

Sharon was born in 1968 to proud parents Christopher and Shirley Nikiforou. Chris and Shirley tell me Sharon was a gorgeous, strong willed daughter who loved to play with dolls, wear pink dresses and go shopping. Over the 47 years of her life the only thing that changed was that she stopped playing with dolls and started playing with babies. The strong will, love of all things pink and passion for shopping certainly never diminished.

After completing high school Sharon attended Blacktown TAFE and graduated in Secretarial Studies. Sharon was keen to get a job, find a husband, retire, become a housewife and start having babies. Of course at this stage she did not know it would be another 20 years before she would get married and have her own baby.

Sharon's first job was at the Commonwealth Bank primarily doing data entry and then she worked for Security Engineering, Baulkham Hills Council, Anco Australasia, Mine Technik, Merlot Constructions, MEA, Portrait Place and finally as a branch assistant with Integral Energy. She made lots of friends at each job and many have stayed in contact with her throughout her life. Sharon's personality was so full of life that some people could not handle her honesty but many others were attracted to Sharon's strength and vitality.

During her working life Sharon was able to save a deposit for a house and at only 25 she bought her first home on her own in Hassall Grove. That was a remarkable effort for a young

lady and it shows how driven she was to achieve whatever she wanted. When I first met Sharon her ability to budget and stretch her wages to cover her mortgage amazed me. Sharon sold Undercover Wear to supplement her income and had little sections in her purse for the mortgage payments and the car payments, electricity etc. However, once we combined our wages and bank accounts Sharon mysteriously lost the ability to budget and her capacity for shopping grew to new heights.

Soon after Sharon purchased a house she met a man and they became engaged. However (fortunately for me) things did not work out and the engagement was broken off. Sharon was devastated by the break up as she had not only lost her partner but was also very close to her fiancée's young son. Sharon had a few boyfriends over the following years but it was not until she was 32 that she met her future husband, the very handsome Bruce Lees.

Many of you will know how Sharon and I met but I will tell the story again quickly. Basically I was lonely and asked my hair dresser if she knew any pretty girls who were desperate enough to date a divorced 34 year old man with 2 kids and a big mortgage. The hairdresser said she did know a lady who was currently single, very maternal and might be able to see through my flaws primarily because I was tall. So I gave the hairdresser my business card and asked her to request this lady to call me. And to my surprise Sharon did call and we arranged our own blind date. I think it shows the strength of character and the courage that Sharon possessed that enabled her to make a call like that, and I am forever grateful that she did. We arranged to meet at a coffee shop in Winston Hills and I got there early and waited outside. I watched all the various ladies walking toward the coffee shop and sometimes I would see a lady and think, I hope that is Sharon and they would not walk into the coffee shop and I would be disappointed, then I would see another lady and think I hope that is not her and be massively relieved when they walked past.... But when it actually was Sharon approaching I just knew it was her – I am not known to be romantic but I think I loved Sharon from the moment I saw her. We just instantly connected and she made me smile and laugh. I did not know that later on she would make me cry like a child but I would not change a thing or miss a moment of our feisty relationship for anything. Her favourite way to refer to me was "Oh Bruce" when I had disappointed her or "you Stupid Man" when I had not been listening to my instructions. I still hear her saying it now and hope I will for the rest of my life.

Sharon was always in a hurry and so it was not long before we sold both our houses and bought a house together in Cranebrook. Sharon was an amazing step mother to my sons Brandon and Justin and she fell in love with them very quickly. But it was obvious very early in our relationship that Sharon wanted to have her own children. In fact Sharon told me this on our first date. Sharon had many great qualities but subtlety and diplomacy were not among them.

After 3 years of dating Sharon and I became engaged on Whitehaven Beach in the Whitsunday's and in February of 2005 we were married in a lovely ceremony in Wollongong. We had the service in a beachside park, photos on the beach and a wonderful reception at the Novotel and Sharon was so very beautiful and so very happy.

After the wedding we went to Tasmania for our honeymoon. I had managed to hold Sharon off on the baby making front until we were married but once that excuse had been removed Sharon pursued me around that small island without mercy. And so shortly after Sharon was the happiest pregnant lady in Australia.

In November of 2005 Sharon gave birth to Cooper Christopher Alan Lees. And what a wonderful mother she was. So selfless and so attentive to her baby boy. Cooper suffered from reflux as a baby and it was Sharon who chased the doctors until they diagnosed the problem and offered a solution. She was always relentless in pursuit of his wellbeing. Cooper is growing into a fine young man and Sharon is so very proud of him. I know all mothers love their sons but I have never before seen a bond like the one Sharon and Cooper share.

It was just under 2 years later when Sharon had talked me into trying for another child that Sharon was diagnosed with breast cancer; and so began the remorseless, unrelenting and recurring cycle of operations, scans, blood tests, chemotherapy, radiology, hair loss, nausea, hospital stays, etc. It was tough and there was great pain, much sadness and continual setbacks over the years but Sharon was a tough lady and she overcame adversity again and again. Sharon's will to live was so strong because she loved the life she had built with her son, her step sons, her family and her great friends and she fought like a warrior for 8 long years. But the 8 years were not all bleak and her life also contained much happiness.

Cancer was a big black cloud in Sharon's life but the silver lining was that it meant she could retire from work and fulfil her dream of being a house wife. She was able to take Cooper to and from school each day, she volunteered at the school with reading classes and she got to pursue her many hobbies including yoga, ceramics, scrap booking, walking her dog and mosaics. She also loved selling jewellery from Envy, handbags from Miche and skincare from Laura Bright & Nutrimetics. Sharon volunteered for a company called Yawn that help young mothers look after their babies and she loved those babies. I think the mothers of the babies were quite shocked when they found out Sharon had breast cancer and they may have wondered why she was helping others when she was so ill. But that speaks of the selfless and giving nature of Sharon.

Sharon raised money selling cancer council merchandise and she completed a course to become a breast cancer foundation ambassador which involved speaking at schools and companies about her story fighting cancer. She also spoke at my companies annual conferences and she left many grown men in tears as she told her story but Sharon always finished her speech by saying, "the last thing I would like to say to everyone is ENJOY YOUR LIFE – I KNOW I AM !!!!"

After Sharon's diagnosis we reevaluated our lives and resolved to make the most of every day. We do not have negatively geared property or an investment portfolio but we had wonderful family holidays in Cairns, Hobart, Gold Coast, Umina, Vanuatu, Fiji, London, Cornwall, Wales, Amsterdam, Paris, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Melbourne, Perth, Orange, Canberra, Port Macquarie, Germany, Noosa, Denmark, Mudgee, Rome, Whitsundays, Wollongong, Newcastle and New Zealand. We also bought an on-site caravan in Ulladulla

and Sharon was at her happiest when she was walking on the beach there collecting shells and watching the ocean. That is where I think of Sharon now – walking barefoot on the sand, in a long pink dress and bedecked in jewels.

Sharon loved her friends and family very much and I have not mentioned many of you in this eulogy but I am sure you are aware of how she felt. Sharon never had any difficulty in ensuring people knew how she felt about them. She was an amazingly strong and inspirational lady and she crammed so much life into her 47 years that I cannot do it justice in just a few minutes. Her capacity for fun and laughter in the face of tragedy astonished me and she made my life immeasurably better.

My wife has left us but I will never forget her and I hope you remember her so that she can live on in our thoughts.

Goodbye my sweet princess.