

When the Reporter Becomes the Story

How Much Do You Share?

By *Linda Hurtado*

I've been a health reporter for the ABC station WFTS-TV in Tampa, Fla., for over ten years. I've put together reports on topics from new medical treatments to the latest studies on how to lose weight, but what really feeds my journalist's soul are the heartfelt, human interest stories. I've been in the operating room while a woman who recently lost twins, gave birth to another baby. That baby was blue. I've waited in the hospital with two families as an infant's heart arrived and doctors had to decide which dying baby would get a chance at life.

In 2011, after spending years convincing people to trust me with their most intimate moments, I had to decide whether to trust those same people with mine.



The day I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I called our assistant news director and between sobs, told her the truth. In that moment, I stopped working on the stories of others and began writing the most important story of my career, the story of how I intended to save my own life.

I took that first week off, because I had a slew of tests to get, from MRI's to PET scans. I had surgeons and oncologists to interview, information to gather, decisions to make. To be honest I don't even know what I would have done if my bosses had told me I had to work, but they were supportive from day one.

My background as a reporter really helped me face that devil dancing inside me. I knew that knowledge was my friend and after researching the treatment options offered, I made a decision to have a double mastectomy — even though my cancer was caught in the

earliest stages and there were less invasive options. By having this surgery, I would lessen the chance of recurrence while sidestepping the need for radiation and chemotherapy — treatments that had ravaged my beautiful mother ten years before.

Did my career as a news anchor play into that decision? Sure. I didn't want to lose my hair. What woman does? Did I fear losing my job during this battle? No. Not even once. My news director, Doug Culver, made it clear from day one that I needed to take care of me first. Work would wait.

With game plan in hand, support from management and co-workers, I was ready to fight. But I still had one more decision to make. What would I say to my viewers and my friends? I'd been on TV in Tampa for 17 years. It was October, breast cancer awareness month and my TV station had just started a billboard campaign across Tampa Bay with a picture of Ellen DeGeneres on one side — me on the other — promising to be the best part of their day. Now, I'd be vanishing for a while.

My news director told me the decision on what to share was mine alone, but he knew a friend of Good Morning America's Robin Roberts, who had so bravely shared her diagnosis with America. Did I think she could help me make up my mind on how to handle an announcement? I spent twenty minutes on the phone with a very compassionate anchor woman who had walked this road before me. What that conversation made me realize is I really did want to be in control of my own story. I knew from watching videos go viral that the first story is always the one that travels the most. I wanted the facts to be right. I wanted to speak my own truth.



My news director supported my decision, giving me time and a photographer to shoot the story I wanted to tell. You can view it

at abcactionnews.com. But I didn't want my announcement to be a pity party for me, so I turned my story into a plea for women to get screened. I put local resources onto a simple web site I made and the response blew me away.

After my story, hundreds of women contacted the regional Susan B. Komen affiliate asking for financial help with mammograms. The phone lines lit up at local hospitals with women scheduling mammograms.

I took five weeks off for my double mastectomy, two weeks off for reconstruction surgery. Months after returning to work, I'm now back to doing stories on medical treatments and weight loss but I'm also still getting emails like this one:

Linda we have been watching you on the news for a long time. But when you gave your own story about your cancer, we prayed for you and, listened to you. My roommate and I went for our yearly monograms. They found something. We went to Moffitt, they were great. She had a stage 2 , Dr Lee cut it all out, and took 2 lymph nodes out. They were negative. She will go though 5wks of radiation. And has great sprites [spirits], doing well.. My test showed I need a biopsy, which I will do Wed. I am sure I will be fine... But just want to thank you for sharing, and reminding us to keep in check...

Hope you and your family are well.

*Thank You
A viewer*



What I learned is that sharing my story was the right thing to do for me and that ultimately the story where I may have the most impact as a medical reporter is quite possibly my own. □



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