


*Desperate Housewives'*  
Marcia Cross  
is helping  
lead the battle  
against cancer  
in marches,  
through her  
advocacy,  
and at home

# Fighting BACK

Marcia Cross, the 47-year-old flame-haired actor famous for playing provocative, oh-so-perfect Bree on ABC's hit TV show *Desperate Housewives*, as well as unstable seductress Dr. Kimberly Shaw on the popular 1990s nighttime soap, *Melrose Place*, has added another role to her repertoire: health advocate. Cross is now lending her talents to Stand Up To Cancer (SU2C) as a celebrity ambassador to raise public awareness and generate funds for ongoing research, with the goal of eradicating the disease forever.

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Cross has long been connected to the fight. Before joining SU2C in May of this year, she was the face of Oil of Olay's "Skin Cancer Takes Friends" campaign in 2007 and 2008, which urged people—and their closest companions—to schedule regular skin cancer checkups. "Having had two family members stricken by melanoma, I've become very passionate about helping to educate the public about skin cancer prevention," the Emmy-nominated actress said when the campaign launched. "Thanks to early detection, both my grandfather and cousin survived the disease, but too many others aren't as fortunate. I urge everyone to protect themselves and their loved ones by scheduling a free screening together. Those few minutes could save lives."

Cross is also a familiar sight at Revlon's annual Run/Walk for Women each May, a huge draw for boldfaced names and non-celebrities alike.

She is not merely attaching her name to the cancer cause—however worthy it might be—for good publicity; her motives are far more personal than that. Cross' husband of three years, stockbroker Tom Mahoney, 50, was diagnosed with an undisclosed cancer last fall. And her first partner, actor Richard Jordan, died in 1993 of a brain tumor after five years of their being a committed couple.



Cross speaks out on a range of issues close to her heart, including cancer awareness and women's rights.

"We should be fighting cancer from a healthy position, before we get that diagnosis. We have to wake up!"

"Stand Up To Cancer is really 'Stand Up To Not Getting Cancer,'" Cross tells WebMD passionately. "Cancer is so pervasive: I've had friends and relatives with breast cancer, prostate, melanoma, you name it ... and we're all in reactive mode. We should be fighting it from a healthy position, before we get that diagnosis. The chemicals we use, our household cleaners, the foods we eat, our stress levels: Our bodies were not meant to absorb this level of toxicity. We have to wake up!"

### Getting Informed

Too many people, Cross would agree, are still confronted with this disease. More than 1.4 million Americans will be diagnosed with cancer this year, and an additional 11 million-plus Americans are classified as cancer survivors. As one of Hollywood's most successful television



Cross with her husband, Tom Mahoney.

actresses, Cross has a powerful platform from which to speak—specifically to promote cancer prevention and early detection.

"Celebrity ambassadors like Marcia are tapped for their degree of influence to extend the reach of our message," says Kathleen Lobb, founding member of SU2C, "which is to communicate to every American that they can do something to end cancer, whether it's to donate one dollar or 1 million dollars to support research, or to change personal behaviors and begin screenings for themselves and their loved ones."

And while she is open to complementary and alternative treatments, Cross says she isn't sure she "would pick one as my first line of defense." But she thinks it's essential to consider "what's available to treat the whole body ... one system should complement the other."

Access to information on different approaches—both traditional and alternative—is what's key, says Cross. Right after her husband received his diagnosis, she hit the Internet and can't imagine not having it as a resource during their time of crisis. "I read so many case histories," she says. "The amount of information I needed to absorb ... I was spouting off other people's experiences to Tom. ... It was invaluable. We went into appointments with our doctors already familiar with what they were suggesting. And

# GIVE & TAKE

Remember this, caregivers: It's just as important for you to receive

What is the biggest responsibility of caregiving? "You have to be there as a person," says Marcia Cross. Still, when "being there" means tackling a mountain of medical details, sleeping in waiting rooms during surgeries, and offering emotional sustenance to your spouse—even as you tend to the needs of your children, go to work, and maintain a household, all while staving off your own internal terror—burnout quickly ensues, both mental and physical.

"It's extremely important for caregivers to care for themselves," Terri Ades, APRN-BC, AOCN, director of cancer information at the American Cancer Society in Atlanta, tells WebMD. "Sometimes this means putting your own needs first. It can include joining an online support group to talk to other caregivers and share experiences. Or it can mean reaching out to others in your family, or at work or church.

"But first you need to honestly assess how thoroughly you can assume this new role, because—and this is really important—not everyone is born to be a caregiver. Seek help for what you can't take on."

If you are currently caring for a sick spouse, relative, or friend, Ades recommends joining an online caregivers discussion group. [WebMD.com](http://WebMD.com) hosts an active caregiving support message board. Other caregiving support networks include:

**American Cancer Society**  
[cancer.org](http://cancer.org)

Check out this link for tips on coping, how to provide care, end-of-life issues, and connecting with other caregivers.

**Cancer Care**  
[cancercare.org](http://cancercare.org)

Click on "Get Help" on the site's home page for guidance on a wide range of financial, emotional, and medical concerns.

**Caregivers4Cancer**  
[caregivers4cancer.com](http://caregivers4cancer.com)

Created by the wife of a cancer patient, this site speaks to caregivers who feel overwhelmed by offering emotional support and ample resource information.

**Family Caregiver Alliance**  
[caregiver.org](http://caregiver.org)

Visit this site for online support groups, advice, public policy information, and research.

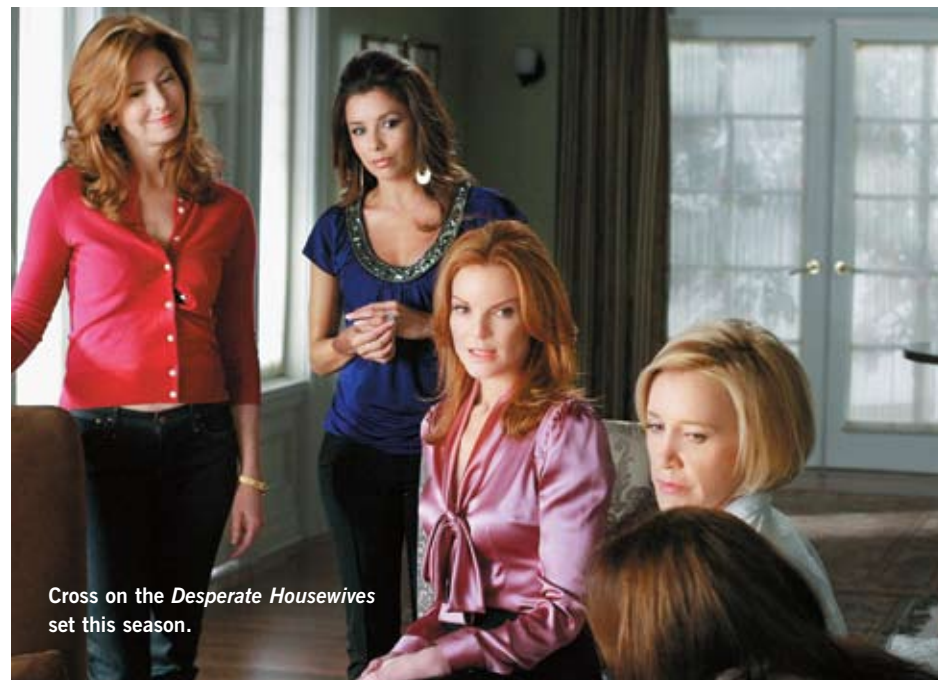
it offered us a sense of control, too, because we could make informed decisions."

The real question to ask, Cross thinks, is: *Why is there so much cancer out there in the first place?* That's why she is devoting herself to publicly discussing what was, not so long ago, only whispered about—as if even saying the C-word out loud served as an invitation for rogue cells to wreak havoc.

Her personal connections to the disease also led her to reexamine how she lives.

Cross says she has traded regular cleaners for "vinegar and water ... I'm now aware of everything used in my house, everything that gets touched, absorbed into our skin, or ingested." She buys only organic fare and wouldn't dream of eating "junk food or anything processed."

These measures are not possible for everyone, though, and she acknowledges that she's not perfect. "I use organic makeup and do the chemical-free dry cleaning, but



Cross on the *Desperate Housewives* set this season.



I haven't given up my hair dye yet. God knows what it's doing to my scalp. But I'm working on that!"

### Diagnosis and Caregiving

Cross speaks of an "end of innocence" that occurs when we first realize that illness can steal away our loved ones. "I lost my virginity, so to speak, a long time ago," she says, referring to Jordan's shocking diagnosis and death more than 15 years ago.

She's still processing all that's happened since. "When you face this kind of surprise trauma—followed by loss—for the first time, it's a double whammy. ... So when this happened with Tom, I already knew that every day is a gift, a blessing. I already understood that every day you don't get that terrible phone call with bad test results is a very lucky day. Before Tom's diagnosis, I used to say to him every night, 'We are so lucky. We have each other. We have our babies.'" Cross and Mahoney are parents to 2-year-old twins Eden and Savannah, triumphantly conceived through in-vitro fertilization just one week after the couple married in 2006. "Because," she adds with knowing emphasis, "life can turn on a dime."

As it did last November, when she sat with Mahoney in his doctor's office and together they received the frightening news: It was cancer. As the spouse of someone suddenly sick, Cross went from "just living everyday life to being thrown into this alternate universe of hospitals and doctors and radiation and chemo."

Still, "An odd competence took over me immediately," she says from her home in Los Angeles, where she is currently resting—if one can "rest" with two toddlers in tow—during a hiatus from her weekly *Desperate Housewives* series. "When you become the caregiver to your spouse ... there's no time to wallow. You have to be on the ball. For the first six months, I managed with a mix of denial and just total competence, dealing with what had to be done every day. ... Only now am I going through a post-traumatic-stress reaction, crying a lot, dealing with my own fears, thinking about how hard it was to watch him suffer. Only now do I find I'm tender trying to talk about it."

Cross's experience isn't at all surprising, says Terri Ades, APRN-BC, AOCN, director

of cancer information at the American Cancer Society in Atlanta. "What happens typically with a cancer diagnosis is that the 'machine' starts up very quickly. Everything goes into motion—the treatment, the

patient's needs—at a very rapid pace. There is no time to stop and think."

Many caretakers assume immediate and sometimes complete responsibility for their loved ones when illness strikes, from

## SOLAR POWVER

### Check up on your melanoma smarts

With a grandfather and a cousin who both fought melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, Marcia Cross knows to avoid the sun during peak hours (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.) and to safeguard herself and her family with sunscreen and floppy hats. Most of us know that, right? But here's what you may not know about melanoma:

**Hide and seek.** According to the American Academy of Dermatology, 10% to 15% of all cases of melanoma diagnosed each year in this country are on areas of the body that were never or only rarely directly exposed to harmful UV rays. For instance, melanoma can appear on the scalp beneath the hair, between the toes, on the soles of feet, in the palms of hands, in the eyes—even on the genitals. If not detected early enough, it can metastasize to other areas of the body.

**Ban the burn.** Even one bad sunburn in childhood more than doubles your chances of developing melanoma later on. "Children should not be getting sunburned at any age, especially since there is a range of very effective sun protection methods that can be used," says Perry Robins, MD, president of the Skin Cancer Foundation. "Parents need to be extra vigilant about sun protection all the time."

**Spread it on.** How you use sunscreen is also key, says John Huber, MD, a dermatologist at Memphis Dermatology Clinic. "Sunscreen provides a false sense of security, mainly because people put it on and then behave in ways they wouldn't without it. In other words, they stay out in the sun for hours, go swimming, dry themselves off, go swimming again. People forget to reapply. It takes a full 2 ounces to cover the body with every application. And yet I hear patients tell me a single bottle of sunscreen lasts them all summer."

**Bare it.** Leave your sense of modesty at the door. "My patients come in for skin screenings, and the vast majority leave on their underwear and bras. While I respect my patients' reservations, we shouldn't allow modesty to stand in the way of a full body examination. Skin is skin. And cancerous moles can appear anywhere." So next time you get your skin checked, tell your doctor you plan to go "the full monty." It could save your life.—LPK



Cross with twins Savannah and Eden, hatted up for the park.

JEAN BAPTISTE LAGROIX/GETTY IMAGES

seeking the right physicians to scheduling appointments and monitoring medications. Cross and Mahoney worked as a team. "We formed a great partnership with Tom's doctors before his treatment began," she says. "He had time to choose the where, the when, and the how. It was his decision."

Caregivers, according to Cross, should keep their eyes trained on the big picture of cancer protocols—and all medical procedures, for that matter. "Our doctors were so kind and caring, I just can't say enough about them. But doctors are trained to specialize; Western medicine teaches them to look at the disease, or the single body part ... but as a caretaker you see the whole body in action, you know every aspect of the treatment, and you know if something's been overlooked."

When it comes to marriage, especially when vows of "in sickness and in health" are tested, the actress maintains, "It's important to remember that there's a 'we,' there's a 'him,' and there's a 'you.' And you can't completely ignore your own needs. Sometimes you have no choice. But I knew I'd gone way too long—we got the diagnosis [last] Thanksgiving—so I decided June would be my month to finally focus on myself, or at least try."

The actress surrounded herself with girlfriends—"female friends are where women find our nourishment"—and while she made it to only a single yoga class, she took a family vacation, got a massage, and tried her best to relax. "It was about internally shifting my focus," she says. "I blocked myself off from extra responsibility."

### Twin Joys

Eden and Savannah are clearly their parents' delight. Cross delivered them in February 2007 after 10 long weeks of bed rest (prescribed by her ob-gyn because she developed preeclampsia, a condition with high blood pressure and protein in the urine that can endanger the health of both mother and child). But even dealing with the stresses of the last year, Cross has found more joy and relief than burdens when it comes to caring for her twins.

Asked what she finds most surprising about motherhood, Cross pauses, then says, "As much as I wanted them, I guess

**"Really love 'em—then let 'em go. They're going to be who they're going to be. That's the beauty of parenthood."**

I'm surprised at how fulfilling I find it. And there are these moments that are so sweet and profound. Like last night, Savannah helped me put Eden to bed first, and she sang three or four songs to her sister, who was lying in her crib. ... You get these amazing moments all the time."

As for what's toughest about being a mom, she answers readily: "Guilt. I know they don't need me every single second of the day ... but I also know how every phase is so fleeting. And I hate missing any of it! But I'm blessed ... I've been able to juggle it all. It's been tricky, of course. I might have a really long 12- or 14-hour day where I won't see them at all, but then I'll have two or three days off. And I bring them on the set. They come to the trailer, which is no easy feat. But I've worked it out."

The only parenting philosophy Cross applies, besides never letting her kids play in the California sunshine without wearing sunhats, SPF 50, and long sleeves, is a simple one: "Really love 'em—then let 'em go." She adds, "They're going to be who they're going to be. And that's the beauty of parenthood." Spoken like a caregiver—to her family, herself, and to all those who benefit from her work to end the scourge of cancer—who knows what she's doing. ■



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