

A SISTER'S *Promise*

BY PAIGE BOWERS

NANCY BRINKER IS A GLOBAL AMBASSADOR IN THE WORLD'S FIGHT AGAINST BREAST CANCER, A CAUSE BORNE OUT OF A PROMISE TO HER OLDER SISTER.



NANCY BRINKER (RIGHT) FOUNDED THE SUSAN G. KOMEN FOR THE CURE ORGANIZATION IN HONOR OF HER SISTER, SUSAN. TODAY, PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN WALKS AND RACES ALL OVER THE WORLD TO HELP RAISE AWARENESS AND MONEY IN THE HOPES OF ENDING BREAST CANCER FOREVER.



NANCY BRINKER

Sisters make promises to each other all the time. *I promise not to tell Mom. I promise not to tell anyone. I promise not to get anything on your favorite dress if you'd please let me borrow it just this once.*

Some of these promises are made to be kept. Others—the ones uttered with fingers crossed—are not. But then there are promises like the one Nancy Brinker made three decades ago to her older sister, Susan, who was dying of breast cancer.

I promise to end breast cancer forever.

This was no ordinary promise because it would become the cause of Brinker's life, embodied in the multinational breast cancer organization Susan G. Komen for the Cure, which is known globally for its delicate pink ribbon logo and fundraising walks and races. One of the major funders of breast cancer research, Komen has helped train more than 400 breast cancer researchers and has supported almost 2,000 research projects over the past three decades. In 2009 alone, Komen doled out some \$60 million in research grants to U.S. and international scientists.

And to think, this cause was borne out of a sisterly bond between two Midwestern girls—one a

self-professed awkward tomboy (Nancy), the other a sweet beauty queen (Susan)—both of whom wanted to help other people suffering from a disease so stigmatized that people feared it was contagious. Susan died in 1980, at age 36. Four years later, Brinker fought her own battle with breast cancer. When her treatments were complete, Brinker, then a Dallas resident, set out to make good on that pledge to her sister.

"I realized that during the Vietnam War, 59,000 soldiers died, but in that same time period, 339,000 people died of breast cancer and no one was outraged," Brinker says.

Part of it was due to perceptions about the disease, she says. In her efforts to launch a breast cancer advocacy network, Brinker learned that potential sponsors didn't want to be associated with any type of cancer and newspapers refused to print the words "breast cancer" at all. Faced with those challenges, Brinker took "a few hundred dollars, a shoebox [full of friends' names to call] and a great platform" to start the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation from her living room in 1982. The foundation changed its name to Susan G. Komen for the Cure in 2007.

"I knew if I was ever going to have a chance to change the culture and address the eradication of this disease, whatever I did had to be big and it had to be grassroots," Brinker says of her organization, which now has a network of millions of activists all over the world. "I also had to have the most effective organization in the world."

One year later, the first Race for the Cure was run around a Dallas shopping mall. Today, more than 1.5 million people run in the race series each year in more than 120 cities around the world. This year, the West Palm Beach version of the race will be held on January 30.

"In the past two decades, breast cancer has gone from a stigmatized illness to a health problem that people feel comfortable talking about," says Dr. Eric P. Winer, director of the Breast Oncology Center at Boston's Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. "I believe that Nancy has thrust breast cancer into public view and made the needs of women who have it a national concern."

Winer, who also is Komen's chief scientific adviser, says he believes there will be a dramatic decline in breast cancer-related mortality in the next 10-15



BRINKER AT ONE OF THE MANY RACE FOR THE CURE EVENTS. SCENES FROM THE SUSAN G. KOMEN SOUTH FLORIDA RACE FOR THE CURE, WHICH WILL BE HELD THIS YEAR ON JANUARY 30 IN WEST PALM BEACH.

years, followed by advances that will eventually enable doctors to end the disease.

The advances will be spurred by Brinker's passion. "She is a truly tireless woman," Winer says. "If I e-mail her at 1 a.m., I usually have a response from her by 3 a.m. There is not an hour or two that goes by when she is not thinking about breast cancer. Her inability to sleep may be painful for her, but it helps women around the world who have this disease."

If anyone knows that, it's WPBF-TV 25 anchor Kristin Hoke, who has been battling breast cancer off and on since January 2005. Hoke has not only interviewed Brinker in her Palm Beach home (where Brinker visits to rest and spend time with her mother a few days out of each month), but befriended her as well. After her diagnosis, Hoke turned to Brinker for advice about treatment. Brinker, in turn, directed Hoke to Winer, who was conducting a clinical trial that might benefit her.

"That's the kind of woman she is," Hoke says. "She sees each person as an individual story and does her best to make their lives better."

Hoke's fight continues. In 2007, three months after she gave birth to her daughter, Isabella, her cancer returned. "The day I was diagnosed I told [my oncologist] I couldn't [endure chemotherapy] and raise a baby," Hoke recalls. "She told me you can and you will. And two years later, here I am. I believe in miracles and I believe we will find a cure for this."

Hoke re-entered chemotherapy in late 2007, determined to get rid of 50 tumors. She is still fighting five tumors, but is grateful for the support she continues to receive from friends, family and her colleagues.

"Difficult times forge who you are," she says. "And I am hopeful that this cancer will be kicked to the curb so I can enjoy my daughter and husband."

As head of a global movement that has destigmatized breast cancer, decreased its mortality rates and inched closer to wiping it off the map, Brinker has become a sought-after speaker and government official, in part because of her work on behalf of people like Hoke. She has served as U.S. Ambassador to Hungary, the Chief of Protocol for the United States and is currently the World Health Organization's Goodwill Ambassador for Cancer Control.

That work in diplomacy has served her well. In October 2009, she flew to Egypt for a Komen breast cancer conference, only to land and discover that the Egyptian government had turned away a group of Israeli breast cancer researchers and advocates.

"A number of organizations called on her to boycott the conference, but she went in and got the Egyptian government to re-invite the Israeli doctors," Winer says. "So she's not someone who runs away from challenges. She's someone who confronts them head on and gets them fixed."

Acknowledging that, in August 2009 President Obama awarded Brinker with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which is the nation's highest civilian honor.

When the White House called Brinker to inform her about her medal, she thought it was one of her friends playing a practical joke. "It took a while for me to believe it," she says. "Once I realized that it was real, I was really taken aback and got tears in my eyes because it would be awarded a few days after the thirtieth anniversary of my sister's death."

The ceremony was an emotional one that she shared with people from Komen, her son Eric and her mother, Brinker says.

"I see this as my mother's medal too," she says.

And though she didn't say it, she probably sees it as her sister's medal as well. ♦

RACE FOR THE CURE

Grab your pink gear and head to downtown West Palm Beach for the nineteenth annual Susan G. Komen South Florida Race for the Cure on January 30.

The West Palm Beach race is part of a global breast cancer movement. Each year, approximately 75 percent of the funds raised in the race remains in Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties to pay for breast cancer education, screening and treatment programs. The remaining funds benefit the Susan G. Komen For the Cure

Grants Program to fund research, and thus far, the South Florida affiliate has contributed more than \$3 million.

The South Florida 2009 race raised more than \$1.7 million with 22,000 participants, and this year's goal is to equal or surpass that sum and sign up 23,000 attendees. Organizers are continuing their quest to go green by encouraging participants to register online. They've also combined the male and female 5K USATF runs. (561-514-3020, komensouthflorida.org)

RACE SCHEDULE

Date: January 30

Registration: 6 a.m.

Co-ed 5K USATF Run: 7:30 a.m.

Individual 5K Walk: 8:30 a.m.

Team 5K Walk: 8:45 a.m.

Kids for the Cure: 9 a.m., ages 6-12

Tots for the Cure: 9:15 a.m., ages 5 and younger

1-mile Fun Walk: 9:30 a.m.

Survivor Recognition and Awards Ceremony: 10 a.m.

LOCATION

Komen events are held at the Meyer Amphitheater. The Komen 5K run/walks start on North Clematis Street and Flagler Drive in Downtown West Palm Beach and continue along the Intracoastal Waterway.

REGISTRATION/FEEES

Mail-in registration: must be postmarked by January 2; include entry form and check payable to Komen South Florida Race for the Cure; send to Komen South Florida Race for the Cure, c/o Hermes Sports & Events, 1624 St. Clair, Cleveland, OH 44114

Online registration: komensouthflorida.org (deadline for teams is January 10; deadline for individuals is January 28)

Competitive 5K run: \$30

Co-ed 5K & 1-Mile walks: \$30

Proud in the Crowd: \$30

Kids for the Cure: \$10

Tots for the Cure: \$5

Sleep-In for the Cure: \$45

For late or race-day registrations, entry fees differ. Visit komensouthflorida.org for prices.

RACE COMMITTEE

Patti Abramson, chairman; Sandy Spender and Karen List, co-chairs; Stephanie Moak Siegel, honorary chair; Adrienne Weissman, consulting and sponsorship chair

