



BY WENDY RUBICAM

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Local garage rock icon, Nicole Laurenne,
shares her story of dealing with her breast cancer diagnosis
and returning to her rock 'n' roll dreams



There is never a good time to find out that you are one of the approximately 200,000 women in the U.S. who are diagnosed with breast cancer each year. For singer and musician Nicole Laurenne, the diagnosis came after a routine mammogram in the summer of 2010, just as her band, The Love Me Nots, was about to record a new album and embark on an extensive overseas tour. "It was incredibly bad timing," she shares. "When the diagnosis was made we were just about to leave for France on a big tour, and then cut our next album in Detroit, so we had all of these dates lined up, all of these tours everywhere all over the world, and all of this money riding on it and we had to cancel everything."

Although the timing was bad, luck was on Laurenne's side in terms of the diagnosis itself. "It's amazing that they saw what they saw in that mammogram, because it was the tiniest stage zero cancer. So it was just a fluke that somebody happened to see it and they caught it in time," the singer explains.

Because of a strong family history of breast cancer, Laurenne had been tested for the breast cancer gene, and knew that she did, in fact, have the genetic mutation linked to a greatly increased risk. "My dad had breast cancer and lymphoma, and so having gone through all of that with him I stayed pretty on top of things. I kind of felt like my day will come and I had to keep an eye out for it," she says. "I know a ton of people who are just afraid to even get checked out because they're terrified of what the news is going to be, but it's way worse to not know that news," she says emphatically. "This is something you can do something about—it's not some big, scary thing in my mind anymore," she concludes.

Because of her high-risk status, Laurenne opted to immediately undergo a double mastectomy, hysterectomy and reconstructive surgery, taking a six-month hiatus from the band, as well as her job in the legal profession. "Maybe it's because I was sort of dreading that it would happen to me for the last decade and watching my dad go through it...I think I was so mentally prepared for it when I finally got the news that I was like, 'Okay, here's what I'm going to do—bam, bam, bam—I have a plan and we're going to make this work,'" she says of her decision.

A mother of identical twin 13-year-old girls, Laurenne felt confident in her decision to remove all possible risk by having the surgeries.

"I don't regret any of the steps I've taken. It's not for everybody, obviously. It depends what point you are at in your child-bearing life," she acknowledges. "If they removed everything, then

I could be on hormones and sort of maintain the normalcy of my life without having to go through early menopause, so the transition after the surgeries was really smooth."

Knowing that she didn't require any further treatments like chemotherapy or radiation allowed Laurenne to move immediately into reconstructive surgery, a step she felt was important for herself and for her daughters.

"I never saw myself as a plastic surgery kind of person," she shares. "Since it is in our genetics, it was important for me to send that message to the family that everything can be okay. Also, because I'm out in public I wanted to be as normal as I could and not feel like anything was hampering me. I do a lot of photo shoots and a lot of press and stuff like that, and it's not that I would ever have been ashamed of anything like that, but it was kind of cool to come out of it going, 'I'm exactly like I was and everything's cool.' So that was a big part of it for me."

Calling herself a "silver lining person," she is incredibly positive about the experience. She says that looking back on it, her doctors made it an amazingly easy process.

"The doctors just really had it down," she says. "Even my plastic surgeon had a little vest that he designed just for the reconstructive process that just made everything physically more comfortable. I could move around, I could wear it out in the world, I didn't feel like a freak. Just little things like that—things they had thought through that made everything work."

Dr. William Jacobsen introduced Laurenne to Rachell Hall's Breasthetics Clinic, where reconstruction is completed by nipple/areola re-pigmentation. "It's an amazing last step to the whole thing where you walk out of there going, 'Oh my gosh, I feel completely normal after all of that surgery.' It's amazing," she confides.

For Laurenne, the support of family, friends and bandmates was the key to getting through the months of surgeries and recoveries, and keeping her upbeat attitude. Her mother essentially moved in, helping Laurenne's husband, Michael, manage life while she recuperated.

"Between the two of them they would just constantly crack each other up. They were cooking all of the time and trying to keep things as light as they could, and that was really important for me; but it was really good for my girls too, to not see it as a humongous tragic story, but just as a step that you go through that they might have to also. ...You just do it and take care of each other and move forward," she explains.

Like many husbands who support their wives through cancer,

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Michael needed his own share of recovery time once he knew Laurene was going to be fine.

She shares, "There is not one piece of my life that he did not have to be there for, to manage things all the way through for six straight months, day in and day out, in addition to just dealing with his own life. It takes a toll on everybody, for sure."

In the end, she says, "He always saw the big picture, and you've got to keep your sense of humor. That's what I learned from him through all of this."

Laurene and Michael brought their punk, garage R&B energy back to the stage with *The Love Me Nots* on New Year's Eve in Tempe, and have since produced their album, toured in France, and booked extensive tour dates both in the states and Europe.

The new album, which has received rave reviews, has Laurene's experience with cancer woven into the tracks. "I kept

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writing songs and seeing where it would take me from a songwriter's perspective," she shares. "It was a whole new thing, but it gave a lot of strength to the album. There are songs that refer to everything that happened, and it proved to us that we can do this kind of thing. Everybody kind of hunkered down and got through it together and moved forward."

She continues to draw from her experience, appreciative of the strengthened ties with the band and her family, and looks back on her good fortune with a sense of gratitude.

"We hear ourselves on the radio all the time, and for me, as a kid that was the ultimate dream and that never gets old," she says with a grin. "We were in *Rolling Stone* in June and that was another big dream, and when those pieces of the puzzle fall in, I feel like I don't want to ask for much more, because this is all gravy at this point if you ask me."

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