

Redefining Nikki

BY KRISTY STEVENSON

Over 260,000 women in the U.S. are diagnosed with invasive breast cancer each year. Nikki Speer's family history put her at high risk because her mother, Ginni, and both aunts suffered from the disease. For these reasons, Nikki chose to have a preventative double mastectomy with reconstruction. She has been a previvor for over eight years.

But when Ginni's cancer returned five years after her procedure, and she opted not

of reference. Redefined Courage soon launched as a means to create specialty apparel for breast cancer patients and previvors—developing clothing that women could wear from surgery, to treatment, to [flat] everyday attire.

Nikki's husband, Gerrod, supported the venture, and before they knew it they were ordering fabric and holding meetings to make their dream a reality. They had t-shirts made for people to see their name

process. Breast cancer patients also lent their support. A variety of different designs were given away during the initial stages, asking women to use it for their recovery, share what they liked and what could be improved upon. It gave the Speer family joy to see that the actual people they wanted to help were their best resources. Their final button up design has seams on top of the shoulder rather than under the arm, and features four inside pockets. The goal was to create something comfortable and pretty, that would hide drains, and make women want to get dressed in the morning.

Redefined Courage is now in process of becoming a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. "From day one, our heart has always wanted to give these to people," says Gerrod. At a time of need, and a time when women are going through so many different things, they want to provide something of use. "Something that says, 'you were thought about in this moment,'" says Nikki.

They offer a patent-pending short-sleeve or three-quarter-sleeve cotton post-op shirt (in ivory, navy, blue, and pink), as well as a chemotherapy shawl made from organic bamboo fleece to keep patients cozy and warm during long hours spent in chemo treatments. A 'Made in the USA' moniker was very important to them, and they were thrilled to find a manufacturer here in N.C. Anyone can visit their website, www.redefinedcourage.com, and make a contribution to 'gift' a shirt so that local hospitals may have a supply on-hand to share with patients.

"The idea that Nikki has taken a sketch on a piece of paper and turned it into something real that can help people: that's powerful," says Gerrod. Nikki refers to herself as a dreamer, but Gerrod sees her as a leader who used this opportunity to unify and help her family grow. When she made that promise to her mom, she didn't



to continue chemotherapy, Nikki wanted to help her feel beautiful. They scheduled a shopping trip to find something flowy and flattering. She loved fashion, clothes, and dressing nicely, but was saddened to come away with nothing because of the fit of most designs. As the two were leaving the mall, Nikki promised her mother she would design something for her. "I had no business doing that because I'm not a designer," she says. "But I felt a nudge from God to start drawing." She drew a shirt from the beginning stages of what a woman would go through with a double mastectomy, using her own family history as a frame

and raise awareness, prompting questions and helping raise money for what they wanted to do. Two months later, Ginni passed away, never seeing her daughter's promise come to fruition. But they pressed onward. "Redefined Courage was inspired by the dreams and legacy of my wonderful mother, and women like her," says Nikki.

Knowing what women needed during this time, Nikki felt a connection to the breast cancer community. And as her personal caregiver during procedures, Gerrod also remembers back to where drains were located and what would have helped women through the recovery

know where to start, but felt a calling and ran with the idea. And her love for other women fueled her. “At the end of the day, if the Lord brought us to this for nothing more than personal growth for her, it was worth every second,” says Gerrod.

redefined  courage

Reaching out to others helped with healing after losing her mom. Nikki moved her dad, Michael, into their N.C. home, and he is one of her biggest supporters—having the Redefined Courage logo tattooed on his forearm in honor of his late wife and the cause she inspired. Almost three years after her passing, he still gets choked up talking about it. Ginni was in pain for a long time, but didn’t want her family to know. This disease impacted the family so deeply that since her passing, they refer to how long it’s been not in years but in months. She is still a part of their day, every day. That’s why this cause is so important to them.

Breast cancer doesn’t just touch the women going through it—it touches the husband or boyfriend and the family who are closest to her. “There are a lot of people who want to help,” says Nikki. “But some don’t know what to do, or give, or get. You’re embarking on home care and aren’t sure what to expect. This is a practical and thoughtful option that touches the recipient in the moment they need it most. It’s called ‘Hope’ for a reason.”

Nikki’s children see their mom’s work ethic in everything she does for this cause. “I’m proud of her,” says Colin, age 16. Emma, age 10, says Redefined Courage has motivated her to care for others. And Savannah, age 12, had friends whose mothers had breast cancer. “My mom gave them shirts, and it made them feel beautiful after all they went through,” says Savannah. “She inspires me.”

Ginni’s death taught Nikki that it wasn’t the end, and that there’s more to her story in how she can help others. With no breasts or hair, a chemo belly, and bigger



arms from lymph nodes being removed, women’s bodies have changed—but Redefined Courage’s style fits them and makes them comfortable and confident. “This is the beginning of a new life. It may be life you didn’t plan on, but it’s going to be beautiful,” says Nikki.

Rather than stock a lot of inventory, garments are created on an as-needed basis. This keeps costs low so monies generated can go back into production to help more women. Upcycled fabric cut from sleeves during production was even used to make Redefined Courage headbands that friends and family members could wear to support their loved one. When Hulabelle swimwear from California reached out, headbands were donated for the cancer survivor models walking the runway at Fashion Week San Diego.

“This changed me. And it changed us, and how we want to give back,” says Nikki. She’s left her day job to begin networking with local hospitals and talking to decision makers. A 501(c)(3) status will soon allow them to partner with healthcare workers in the hopes of taking their cause to the next

level. From equipment to pharmaceuticals, healthcare facilities see representatives all day long who try to sell them things. As a nonprofit, Redefined Courage will remove the red tape and can approach them with a ‘we don’t want anything from you’ mentality. HIPPA laws prevent them from directly interacting with patients, but they can provide hospitals, plastic surgeons, cancer centers, and oncology offices with shirts that can in turn be provided to patients. The Speer family sees this as a huge opportunity, and the next logical step in helping their dream become fulfilled.

The memory and legacy of Nikki’s mother still drives her every day. She strives to touch lives because of it. Change is always hard, she says, but good things come from change. “As we grow, we won’t know every hand that touches one of our shirts, but we will be making a difference.”

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