

## BATTLING BREAST CANCER

# SURVIVAL STORIES FOR

Breast cancer is the leading cause of death in women between the ages of 40 and 55 — and the most common form of cancer in America.

A new case of breast cancer is diagnosed every three minutes and, somewhere in this country, a woman dies of it every 13 minutes.

In October — Breast Cancer Awareness Month — The Post is taking an in-depth look at this dread disease.

In the series, we will look at new trends in cancer detection, research and treatment, talk to leading doctors, and spotlight women who have survived.

Today's installment focuses on survivors of all age groups.

By TRACY CONNOR

**T**HERE are few experiences more unifying than a diagnosis of breast cancer — in an instant, thirtysomethings and golden-agers alike find themselves facing the same terrible fear.

"The basic concern for everybody at any age is death — and that's something that never leaves, no matter how old you are," says Lee Miller, a founding member of the support group SHARE and a 25-year breast-cancer survivor.

But within that common ground, diagnosed women at different stages of life have dis-

tinctly different reactions, concerns and experiences.

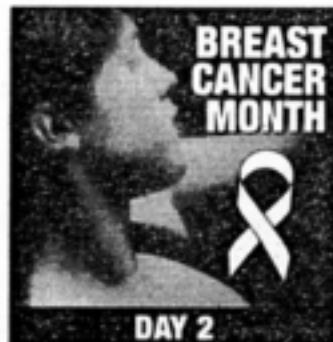
Below, survivors from the metropolitan area talk about how age colored their battle with breast cancer.

### 20s

Impossible. That's what Asha Mevlana thought when doctors found her breast cancer.

"When you're 24, you feel kind of immortal, invincible," the Manhattanite says, 10 months after being diagnosed.

"When they tell you that you have breast cancer at that age, you don't believe it. And then it completely changes your per-



spective on everything."

Roberta Levy Schwartz knows exactly what Mevlana means. She was 27 when her cancer was discovered three years ago — and even the medical professionals had a hard time believing it.

"I would be in waiting rooms, and the nurse or the doctor would come out and see me and immediately turn to my mother. They assumed she was the patient," says Schwartz, who works at Mount Sinai Medical School.

For women in their 20s, this confrontation with death comes just as they're starting to carve out a life for themselves.

"My immediate reaction was, 'I'm a kid,'" Schwartz says. "In your 20s, you're dating and you're going to bars and hanging out, and you have your first job, and you're trying to figure out what you're going to be ... you don't have breast cancer."

But she did — and when the initial shock wore off, her thoughts turned to how she was going to live her life after a mastectomy.

"One of the first things on my mind was, 'Oh my God, how am I going to date with one breast?'" says Schwartz, who met her future husband not long after the surgery.

Mevlana, who had chemotherapy after a lumpectomy, remembers a similar dread.

"At 24, you're in prime dating age and it's scary to think, 'I'm going to be bald.' You don't want people to feel bad for you ... and it affects a lot of people's image of themselves."

A strong support network helps women of any age get through diagnosis, treatment and recovery — but it's not always there for twentysomethings, whose concerns rarely include death.

"A lot of people my age have trouble. They're not really open about it, and they isolate themselves," Mevlana says.

Schwartz reached out, and many of her friends were sources of strength, but others didn't rise to the occasion.

"Some of them literally couldn't handle it," she says. "There are people simply I don't talk to anymore."



**FERTILITY FEARS:** After Lisa Frank discovered a tumor during a self-exam when she was 36, the Manhattan lawyer worried about the uncertainty of having children.

Elizabeth Lippman

### 30s

For women in their 30s, the effect of cancer treatment on fertility can be the most acute issue.

"I never thought I wanted kids, but when someone said to me I might not have the option, it was a whole different story," says Lisa Frank, 38, a Manhattan lawyer who discovered a tumor during a self-exam two years ago.

When Manhattan resident Debra Schatz, who now designs breast-cancer-awareness jewelry and accessories, was diagnosed at the age of 39 in 1986, her thoughts immediately turned to children.

"I was already having this little mini-breakdown because I was turning 40 and I wasn't married — and I was wondering, 'Where's the husband, where's the kids?'"

With cancer treatment on the horizon, the question quickly became not when she would have a family but if she would have one.

"After my treatment, I must

have called 20 different hospitals to see if there were any studies about getting pregnant after early-stage breast cancer. And the thing I found astounding was back then there was no study," she says.

Career can be as pressing a priority as children for women in their 30s — and breast cancer can pose just as big a threat.

Randi Rosenberg, 35, of Jersey City, remembers how she had been promoted at the American Management Association just before her breast cancer was found.

"Besides the initial panic of, 'Am I going to die?' there was another internal panic: 'How am I going to manage this great responsibility that has fallen into my lap and take time for my surgery and chemo and these things that, quite frankly, are getting in my way?'" she says.

"One of the things I remember so clearly was how many hours I was spending in doctors' offices with people trying to save my life and thinking, 'Excuse me,



**SOCIAL ANXIETY:** Asha Mevlana dreaded socializing after her lumpectomy and chemo. She says: "At 24, you're in prime dating age and it's scary to think, 'I'm going to be bald.'" N.Y. Post, Don Halasy