

Robin Gordon

THE POWER OF A WOMAN

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IT'S OCTOBER – BREAST CANCER AWARENESS MONTH. A TIME FOR WOMEN TO COMMIT TO THAT OVERDUE MAMMOGRAM, BE MORE VIGILANT ABOUT SELF-EXAMINATION AND IN GENERAL, BECOME MORE BREAST-AWARE. BUT, AS ALANA RUSHTON DISCOVERED, ROBIN GORDON HAD AN EVEN MORE IMPORTANT MESSAGE. NO EXCUSES. IT'S A TIME FOR WOMEN TO PUT THEMSELVES FIRST.

Breast cancer. Two simple, yet terrifying words we hear far too often today. Daughters, aunts, mothers, cousins, grandmothers, friends, colleagues, nieces, cousins ... no one is immune. Breast cancer doesn't discriminate. And, age is no longer protection. Now, it's common to hear of women in their 30's and even 20's who have been diagnosed. Me? I am one of the lucky ones. I haven't yet been directly touched by breast cancer. Sadly though, it's probably just a matter of time. One day, someone I love, or maybe even I, will fall victim.

This year alone, 14,000 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer. Every day, eight women will lose their battle with this complex disease. That's eight families who have to deal with the loss of their loved one. Eight families who will cry. Eight families who will mourn. Eight families whose lives will never, ever be the same.

My uncle was taken far too young at 46 from bowel cancer and my pa, aged 80, with prostate cancer. It broke my gran's heart to watch her son die, and then her husband, all within eight months. I also saw their deaths through the perspective of my mum – her precious younger brother was gone, and her treasured father was no longer in her life. One life lost impacts so many.

I learnt about the finality of what the death of someone you love means, and also how earth-shatteringly scary it must feel to face the prospect of no tomorrow. I won't get another chance to see them in their usual places, doing their usual things. Uncle George, no longer with his three girls and favourite motorbike, and Pa, no longer with his sweetheart and children in his garden.

Statistics show, that unfortunately, I will be touched somehow by this breast cancer beast in years to come. So, what can I do to ensure my family and I are safe?

First and foremost, I can take better care of my health. And I can encourage the women I love to do the same. Women are very good at taking care of others – our children, our friends, our partners, our parents. We're generally 'nurturers' by nature thanks to oestrogen.

But it's time to factor in regular check-ups, especially when it comes to breast cancer during October – the universal month for awareness. Time to put ourselves first for a change.

Robin Gordon believes it comes down to self respect, and I think she is right.

As chief executive officer of Cairns Women's Imaging and Cairns Radiology, Robin has one simple goal – to ensure we women take better care of ourselves. As the name suggests, Robin's business (of Cairns Women's Imaging) is purely focused on women. And while mammograms aren't the only service the centre provides, encouraging women to have regular mammograms is at the top of Robin's list.

Robin is an incredibly strong woman – successful, intelligent and articulate. But she is also feminine, nurturing and worldly. She believes in the power of women, but she also acknowledges that all this power can be taken away in a second if we don't look after our health and treat our bodies with the respect they deserve.

I wonder where this passion comes from. Her mother and grandmother, she tells me.

"I can hear my grandmother's and mother's words in my head," Robin reflects. "Take care of yourself, because when you do, you can care for what's important to you.

"When you're young the words may seem empty, but as you walk the path of life, you begin to see those words with meaning and truth."

In her quest to help women find meaning and truth in their own lives, Cairns Women's Imaging was born (with a giant pink ribbon plastered on the external wall as a constant reminder of the early detection message), with the help of Robin's husband, radiologist Dr Kevin Daynes.

Their focus is on early detection, particularly for women without symptoms, and accurate diagnosis for those with symptoms. The pair also wanted to dramatically shorten the waiting time between being seen to actual diagnosis.

"With about five to 10 per cent of breast cancers thought to be hereditary, this makes being breast-aware even more important," Robin tells me.

As you can imagine, while many women are shown to have no evidence of the dreaded cancer through Robin's clinic, many also have their lives turned upside down.

"Mostly everyone who walks through the doors for a breast examination has an underlying fear they will hear bad news. So it's a huge relief when they learn all is fine. Some women even break down with tears of relief learning they can walk out with a clear mind. For others, the news is not so good.

"What we've learnt throughout the years is that everyone has their own unique way of coping with bad news."

She goes on to tell me that it's especially hard when telling someone relatively young that they have the disease.

"It's never easy giving someone a diagnosis of cancer. It's even more difficult when they're young with a young family of their own. As hard as you try, sometimes you can't help thinking of your own family."

Robin stresses the importance of setting boundaries in her line of work.

"Part of working in this field is learning to develop boundaries and differentiating between empathy and sympathy. If your boundaries are weak this takes away from the quality of care you can provide to your patients. I have always found solace in coming home to my family after a long tough day at work. Nothing is better than a big hug and an understanding smile from someone you love," she tells me.

Through these experiences, Robin has learnt to take life as it comes.

"Be patient with others and yourself," she says. Stay focused and learn what is truly important in one's life."

And what is most important in Robin's life? Her family.

"Family is the essential core of what keeps me focused. Even after death, the legacy of the person lives within you and this transcends on to the next generation. If there's anything that I have learnt in life it's that if you have something to invest, invest it into the arms of your children as there is no better