

PART
TWO

P.INK DAY

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EMOTIONAL RESCUE

■ Mr Smith ■ Gigi Stoll • gigistoll.com

In the second (and final) part of this article, we continue our look at mastectomy scar coverage - in particular here, with one of the women who took part in the P.INK day session in New York: Mari Ruddy who tells her story shooting straight from the hip:



As you might have gathered from the article last issue, I was not so much unprepared for talking to women who have battled and survived breast cancer, but rather was taken aback at how available they made themselves to me and how open they were to reliving a past they would probably rather forget. It was a revelation. A good one but a revelation all the same - and why? In the name of awareness I guess.

Be aware that nobody ever thinks it can happen to them, be aware that there are things you can do to help yourself and be aware that life will go on afterwards. This big old world

stops turning for nobody that's for sure.

As part of the bigger picture, Noel Franus (P.INK day organisation in case you missed it) set up an interview for me with Mari who lives in Minnesota. My original intention was to do this only once and that was before the tattoo session, but we got on so well that curiosity got the better of me and I decided to see how she appeared after the tattoo.

It was the best choice I could have made. I suspected there might have been a different person in front of me afterwards but was mightily surprised at exactly how positively different.

Let's do this:



IT MADE ME LIVE DIFFERENTLY. I DON'T HAVE ANY TIME FOR PEOPLE WHO TRY TO SUCK MY ENERGY. I AM MUCH MORE DISCERNING ABOUT HOW PEOPLE INTERACT WITH ME AND HOW MUCH TIME I'LL SPEND WITH PEOPLE AS A RESULT. I HAVE TO STAY REALLY POSITIVE, SO WHEN IT COMES TO PEOPLE WHO COMPLAIN A LOT - I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THAT. BEFORE, I DIDN'T SO MUCH CUT PEOPLE OFF THE WAY THAT I DO NOW AND BY THAT I MEAN NOT ACTUALLY HAVING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEM.

BEFORE

"First of all - I don't have any tattoos except for the five dots that they tattooed me with when I got radiation. They hurt! I was very angry when they did that, I negotiated very strongly for magic marker but they weren't listening!"

So begins our story with Mari - I like her a lot. She's another fighter. Upbeat, vibrant and I get the impression that if life were to swing its heavy hammer in her direction again, she'd simply go to the gym to get ready to kick its ass right back.

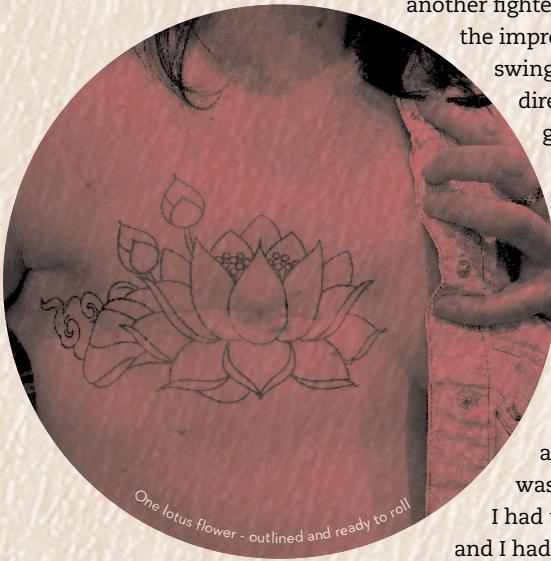
"My basic backstory in terms of my health is that I have had Type 1 Diabetes for 32 years and I have survived breast cancer - twice. Nobody in my family has had breast cancer - or any cancer actually - so it was a surprise. The first time I had to have a lumpectomy and I had chemo, radiation and

took some drugs. I was fine for six years until I found another lump in the same breast. A different part of the breast but still.. what they told me was that it was a second primary cancer, so it was like I grew cancer from scratch - twice.

"The second time, they said I had to have a mastectomy because they couldn't do any of the things that they did to me the first time. Now, because of my diabetes and because I had radiation already, the reconstruction would be very complicated and take over eight to ten hours of surgery. So I said no to that and I now have a nine inch scar across my chest which has healed really well and I don't have cancer anymore."

Mari then drops a curveball on me. Turns out she's an endurance athlete. A Type 1 Diabetic endurance athlete? That's something worth talking about. That's no small thing and I draw attention to it as part of the big picture because being fit and healthy might help your immediate lifestyle but as I said previously, it doesn't give you a get out of jail free card by any means.

"It doesn't. I'm also a vegan now and I started a programme in the US specifically for cyclists with diabetes and I did that because people need to





understand diabetes as well as we understand cancer. People say 'you're fat' or 'you don't eat well' but it's way more complicated than that. So for me - my health issues are intertwined and I view them as an opportunity to help people develop more empathy."

Food for thought if you think you've got it rough in your life...

I NEVER REALLY SAW MYSELF DELVING INTO THE TATTOOED WORLD. I LOOKED AT YOUR WEBSITE AND I WAS PRETTY SHOCKED AT HOW DARK SOME OF THE STUFF PEOPLE PUT ON THEIR BODIES IS!

"But now, I have these huge scars across my chest, so when this opportunity with P.INK came up, I figured that this would really feel like a healing badge of honour instead of this massive scar and that's basically why I decided to do it."

I throw into the arena that a lot of people consider a tattoo to be too big a commitment for them, but once something like cancer is introduced into the equation, that immediately propels everything into a whole different league when it comes to perspective.

"You know, somebody posted something on my Facebook page today. It said 'Once you're a cancer survivor, you're always a cancer survivor' and that's so true because it exists in your psyche forever. Getting it the second time actually caused post

traumatic stress syndrome for me. It was such a shock - I was something like an 8% risk that I would even get it the first time and I'm super healthy!"

"I never really saw myself delving into the tattooed world you know. I looked at your website and I was pretty shocked at how dark some of the stuff people put on their bodies is! My family is a little bit stunned that I'm doing this, but they're OK really."

"When I exercise, I don't wear a fake boob. You can tell that there's a space on my chest that is empty. People have seen those photos and know I'm constantly dealing with this part of my body that's not there so I'm picking an image that I've always related to that I know I'm going to be happy with when I'm older."

I point out that part of the regular state of affairs when it comes to tattooing is that a lot of negative comments are pointless anyway. Particularly the ones that run: 'what are you going to look like when you're 90?' As I think I rightly point out here, most of us would be quite happy to get to 90 tattooed or not. Most importantly, people have tattoos for all kinds of reasons - it's not always as cut and dried as the media make out. Mostly though, when it comes to healing, a tattoo can quite often over-ride the damage in ways you never thought possible - we've all seen it happen.

"I'm excited now. I'm going to be working with Ashley Love (New York Adorned). P.INK found her



and she's committed to the project. I really like her style and when she gets back in a few days, she and I will start planning the design. I go to New York on the 19th ready for the 21st which is when we're all getting our tattoos - there are eight of us in total and we'll all be in the same place at the same time for this. My hope is that she can do it all in one session. I want to have the ability to cover it up if I want to as well - we'll figure all this stuff out in the next few days. The skin is right over my ribs and I've regained all the sensitivity so I know that potentially, this is going to hurt a little!"

No kidding...

AFTER

The person that sits in front of me today, is happy. Despite it being some ungodly hour of the morning in Mid West America, Mari is definitely different. Maybe she's still asleep. I know I am and it's after lunch here. She's in good spirits... we talk about Edgar Allan Poe, cats and jetlag.

Let's kick it in at the relevant place here:

"It was an amazing experience to be honest. There were eight of us and we didn't know what to expect from it really. At first, I thought Ashely was a little bit flaky because she hadn't communicated very much with me but it turns out that she was amazing. Totally on point. Once I was physically in her presence, she was never distracted, she was focussed, she had a vision of what we were going to do. She beautifully incorporated my scar without touching it - she knew exactly what she was doing. She was great - it was at

THERE WERE ACTUALLY VERY FEW MEN IN THE ROOM - THOSE THAT WERE, ONE OR TWO BOYFRIENDS - WERE HUMOROUSLY VERY INTENTLY FOCUSED ON THEIR WOMAN!

that point when I was actually there that I stopped worrying. Email was obviously not her thing..."

Most tattoo artists get this a lot - what can you say about working on a person without them being there? You can prep for everything, but until you actually see what you're going to be playing with, there will always be that unfinished percentage at the end that really does need to be done in person. This is good though - it's great to hear perceptions of tattooing from the outside world. We can all get a little bit blasé around here sometimes. Where all the tattoo artists female?

"Yes - but I don't think it will have to be like that in the future. They wanted to create an environment that was an incredibly supportive feeling. There were actually very few men in the room - those that were, one or two boyfriends - were humorously very intently focused on their woman! I took





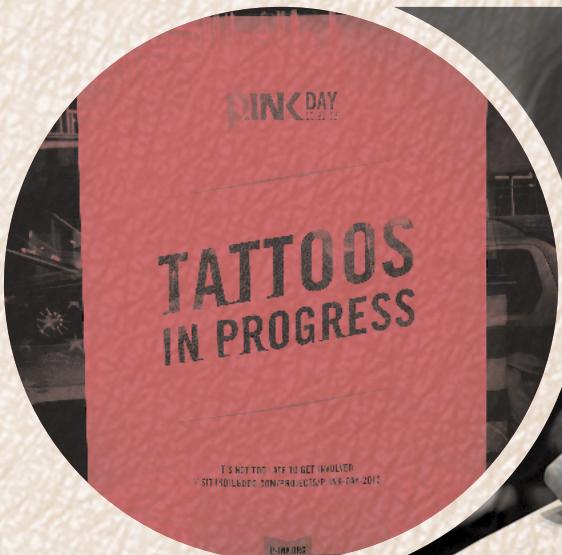
AND FOR THE RECORD - YES, IT HURT! I WAS THERE FOR ABOUT FOUR AND HALF HOURS. I HAVE SOME NERVE DAMAGE SO THERE WERE PLACES I COULDN'T FEEL IT AT ALL BUT OTHER PLACES... I KNEW ABOUT THOSE.

a friend with me for support and she made friends with everybody. She held the hands of several women. There were actually three women who came together and they were so nervous - one of them was 60 and this was her first tattoo. They were all African American and consequently their designs were very

elaborate. One of the sessions was seven hours and one of them screamed more than a few times..."

I think it's probably right and correct at this juncture for it to be women working with women - there's something kind of... 'sisters are doing it for themselves' about it.

"I've had several male doctors though and they were amazing - I think that there's a way that men can be incredibly supportive in this arena. Out of interest, men do get breast cancer too - it's not talked about much and those that do admit to getting it are real heroes for doing so. The men that were in the room though, were incredibly respectful,





didn't take up a lot of space..."

I think if I had been there, I would have felt like I shouldn't be...

"That's what Noel did! We hardly saw him at all but as breast cancer survivors, we've had our shirts off more than on. I was one of the few who draped my shirt, but the others just got it on. Noel interviewed us when we were done and I was amazed by his insight. I was very touched by how he has organised this project and his caring for us."

"And for the record - yes, it hurt! I was there for about four and half hours. I have some nerve damage so there were places I couldn't feel it at all but other places... I knew about those. It's a different kind of pain though. After my surgery, my entire body was in extreme pain and I had to kind of work with it for about eight hours. This pain is a much lower grade comparatively - and it moves too. One of the things that made me really laugh (afterwards) is that the part that hurt the most was one of the tips of the lotus flower, it felt like it was exploding everywhere but when I looked it was like this teeny tiny area!"

"There was some screaming though - one of the women was having some hearts coloured in and a blue jay. It was noisy but her artist talked her through it - knew she didn't want to give up on it and walked her through the pain to get it finished. Again, I was really quite surprised at the wealth of skills these guys have. She really did want to give up... but then when she was done, she was so, so proud of it."

So, the upshot of the whole experience? Positive?

"Well, previously to getting the tattoo, every time I would catch myself in the mirror, inside there would be a cringing response whenever I would see that I had an ugly scar instead of a breast.

I WAS TALKING TO A BARISTA IN THE COFFEE SHOP AND SHE REALLY WANTED TO SEE IT, SO I SHOWED IT TO HER (SHE GAVE ME A FREE COFFEE FOR MY TROUBLE) BUT I NEVER, EVER SHOWED MY SCAR TO ANYBODY

It's been a week now since the tattoo and, some of us have stayed in touch and we now have a significantly different relationship with the mirror.

"I was talking to a barista in the coffee shop and she really wanted to see it, so I showed it to her (she gave me a free coffee for my trouble) but I never, ever showed my scar to anybody. Now, everybody wants to see this tattoo and I can hardly wait to show it. Even when I'm home by myself and I have a chance to look at it - I feel so different about how my body looks. The lotus flower is right where my breast used to be. I look and can say to myself; 'On this side I have a breast and on this side, I have a lotus flower.' It's incredible and delicately balanced. Somehow it feels like I did something that created harmony for myself."

Is that the best line in the world to end this on? I think it may be...