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[Thriving with Breast Cancer](#)

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By Pamela Weinsaft (New York City)

“Thank god for hot flashes,” said Kim Michel, owner of [Michel Financial Services](#) firm in Los Angeles, “They very likely saved my life.”

Last year, just as Michel turned fifty, she began to be troubled by those telltale signs of menopause, and went to consult with a doctor about hormone replacement therapy. During that examination, the doctor felt something “very deep down” in her left breast. And although the annual mammogram and ultrasound she’d had just 30 days prior had disclosed nothing, the doctor wasn’t convinced, and sent her for an urgent MRI.

Just a couple of days later, the doctor called with the results. “He said, ‘You have four tumors on both sides.’ I was shocked, stunned,” said Michel.

With two very young children and many employees counting on her, she knew she needed to be able live her life without having to agonize over every step of the medical treatment. So her first move after diagnosis was to build an all-female team of doctors—her oncologist, her surgeon, her plastic surgeon, her internist— from the [St. John’s hospital in Santa Monica](#). Said Michel, “I wanted to be able to find the very best medical help I could and then put myself in their hands. I didn’t pick the team just because of their gender. I interviewed two people for each of those positions and my connection with those women was so strong; they got it. And my plastic surgeon was a breast cancer survivor so she knew what she needed to do to make me complete again.” She added, “These doctors—

they're my heroes.”

Michel decided to share what was going with everybody at the office, as well as with all her clients. “It was just not anything I felt needed to be kept a secret. The more that people know, the more support you get because people are pulling for you. I just told them all, ‘First I will lose my breasts. Then I will lose my hair. Then I may lose my sense of humor for a couple of weeks. But I will be back. And my surgeon said I am going to be alive at 95 and, while the rest of me is going to look like crap, my breasts are going to be magnificent.’”

She had a double mastectomy. Then, four weeks after surgery, she started a grueling chemo regimen. But she was willing to do what it took to get better. “You feel like you are on a roller coaster for about 4-5 days every six weeks but I would rather be beat up for six months and live than slack off and have a reoccurrence or not a great outcome, she explained.

Michel says she cried more when she lost her hair than when she lost her breasts but she chose to stop using a wig just a couple of months in. “I wanted to just get over the hump of looking in the mirror and being startled with myself. I thought, why should I not allow people to know it is OK to have breast cancer and that I will get through as well as I can? I just put it out there.”

And it was all fine. “I think you find out the value of your team when things are not going so well. I found out I had a fabulous team. They really bucked up, pulled together and we didn't miss a beat. So it was a great experience for me to recognize that I picked the right people to be on this team. That was very satisfying. We just got through it together.”

Not only did they “get through”, they thrived. Just as she methodically interviewed and built her medical team, this CEO and mother of two was also methodically building a vibrant company that today boasts 98 employees in four Los Angeles-area offices. And whether it's a battle for her life or the battle for her company during an economic downturn, Michel assesses her successes in an unassuming way: “It was not a great year, but it was just a year. On the great chart of life, it was just a blip.”

Michel's last chemo treatment was in March 2009, with her breast reconstruction completed in June of this year. She laughed, “It is a lot easier putting them back on than taking them off for sure.”

And, just last month, she found out that her treatment has been successful and there are no tumors. “So much of healing has to do with the power of your own positive thinking. I turned that part of my life over to my team. Because of their confidence, I felt confident. But there was never anything for me to do but to fix this and live beyond this. It was never an option for me not have that kind of an outcome.”

Of how the experience changed her, she said, “I have a calmness about me now. While I have totally thrown out the myth that you could have balance in your life, I do have harmony. If we can have harmony and accept what comes into our lives personally or professionally, we can all be fabulous women. We don't have to be perfect. If we just have a sense of harmony that we are doing the best we can, and being as we wish to be, we are in a good place.”



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