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Sisters struggle with knowledge of cancer risk

RIGHT | Courtney Lercara (left) and her sister Erin Hurley carry the BRCA gene that puts them at an 87 percent risk for breast and ovarian cancer. The sisters devote their time to raising breast cancer awareness.

BELOW | After two breast cancer diagnoses and two mastectomies, Lercara left her job as a special education teacher to create Pink Wings. She sells jewelry, clothing and pins that promote breast cancer awareness.

Photos by
DANIA MAXWELL
THE OREGONIAN



Testing for the BRCA 2 gene gives women information — and a decision they must face

By **TATIANA SANCHEZ**
THE OREGONIAN

At first Courtney Lercara denied it. No way she had breast cancer. She was, after all, only 33. She ate a healthy diet and exercised, didn't smoke or drink. No one in her family had had breast cancer.

"I was 100 percent positive they had mixed up my slide in the lab," Lercara says. "It was somebody else's diagnosis. It wasn't mine."

But after a biopsy of her right breast showed otherwise, she had a lumpectomy to remove the tumor, followed by chemotherapy. Only a year later, Lercara found a lump in her left breast. Instinct told her it was cancer again.

So did the doctor.

Along with the second cancer diagnosis, Lercara



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tested positive for the BRCA 2 gene. Since 1998 when scientists linked the hereditary gene mutation to breast cancer, women have struggled to decide whether to be tested at all, when to be tested, and then, if they test positive, what to do with the information. For those who test positive before a cancer diagnosis, they must consider whether to have pre-emptive breast removal. These are the choices of science in the 21st century.

The gene increases the chance of breast and ovarian cancer up to 87 percent, and approximately 10 percent of breast cancers are due to BRCA gene mutations, according to the National Cancer Institute. As for Lercara, the news would affect her two younger sisters and generations after them.

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SISTERS STRUGGLE WITH KNOWLEDGE OF CANCER RISK by Tatiana Sanchez

My favorite story of the summer was one I wrote toward the end of my term at *The Oregonian*. I cared a lot about this story because I cared a lot about my characters; they had a truly unique story and as a journalist, it was my desire to tell it in a compelling and memorable way. Sisters Erin and Courtney share a deadly gene that puts them at an extremely high risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer. Though only one sister has been diagnosed with cancer, both Erin and Courtney had mastectomies done on each of their breasts. My interview with them proved to be remarkably moving and inspiring-just being in their presence was a very significant experience for me. I know I will remember them for many years to come. It was amazing to see how these women picked up the pieces of their lives after discovering that they had the BRCA gene.

The story was to be a feature for The Oregonian's Race for the Cure section. Though my interview with the sisters was so easy because of their openness, the writing process was extremely difficult for me. Erin and Courtney had a beautiful story, but it was as complicated as it was beautiful. There were so many layers and factors to their story that I was afraid I wouldn't be able to properly convey everything they had shared with me during the interview. I was afraid I wouldn't do it justice. And so I devoted much time and energy to the writing process. I reviewed several drafts with my editor and we felt that the simpler the story, the better. To make it a bit less complex, I organized it in chapters. The story went on to become an A1 centerpiece for September 18, the day of Portland's Race for the Cure. My goal with all the stories I write is to create a piece that I will be proud of when I read it in its entirety- I definitely accomplished this with Erin and Courtney's story.

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