

Adversity Breeds Opportunity

Inspiration comes in strange packages sometimes. And dangerous ones, too.

In 1994, at age 40, Christine Clifford discovered that she had breast cancer – the same disease that claimed her mother’s life at the age of 42. As she reeled at the news, she was overcome by memories of her mother’s cancer diagnosis, descent into deep depression and death. “It was an awful thing to watch,” says Clifford, who was 15 when her mother was diagnosed and 19 when she died.

Then “when I got cancer, I thought, ‘That’s what’s going to happen to me. I’m going to get depressed, I’m going to die,’” Clifford recalls. “I don’t think I’ve met anyone who feels more alone and frightened than I did.”

Though devastated at the time, looking back now 11 years later, she doesn’t regret her cancer experience. “If a magic fairy came along right now and said, ‘Christine, you can have three wishes,’ changing my personal cancer experience would not be one of them.”

Clifford’s cancer unlocked the door to a career of passion and meaning. Through her experience, she created The Cancer Club, a Minneapolis-based company offering humorous products to help people through the cancer experience. As

an award-winning author and motivational speaker, Clifford has the opportunity to offer humor, hope and inspiration to hundreds of thousands of people when they need it most.

Her experience is a testament to the positive life change that the most difficult battles can bring about. Having come out the other end, she sees her fight with cancer as the catalyst for a career that is all about living fully. “I’m living my dream,” says Clifford. “It’s beyond anything I ever imagined I was capable of. It has energized me.”

The Road Warrior

Before her diagnosis, Clifford had what most would describe as a strong career as a senior executive vice president for SPAR Marketing Services, a marketing company focused on Fortune 1000 clients.

But her first indication that something was amiss was a lump in her breast she found in a routine self-exam. It didn’t show up on her mammogram, and three doctors assured her that she didn’t have cancer. She finally convinced her gynecologist to do a needle biopsy and heard the news she least wanted to hear. It was cancer.

The cancer, which had invaded the chest muscle, was growing quickly and

required aggressive treatment. Clifford went into surgery on New Year’s Eve Day. Most people spread the treatment out, but because of the advanced stage of her cancer, she immediately began simultaneous chemotherapy and radiation.

Her breast cancer put things in perspective. “I realized that I no longer cared whether I could help Procter & Gamble get another new box of Tide on the shelf. I wanted to be doing something that would allow me to make a living, help other people, and bring joy and passion back into my life.”

One significant trigger: In all the cards, flowers and notes of encouragement people sent, there was never anything to make her laugh. “There is a huge need for humor during the cancer experience. It’s such a long experience. If you don’t find humor in that amount of time, you will simply dry up.”

The Twilight Zone

That humor for Clifford came in what she now calls her *Twilight Zone* experience. “One night, I woke up at 3 a.m. and started madly sketching cartoons about things that had happened to me. All these quirky, offbeat, whimsical things came flooding back that night,” she recalls. “I literally came downstairs one person and went back upstairs another. I crawled into bed, pulled the covers under my chin, and thought, ‘What was that?’”

Those cartoons formed the foundation for *Not Now...I’m Having a No Hair Day!* (University of Minnesota Press), a book about the humorous side of the cancer experience. She quickly began to see the potential for more. “My marketing mind kicked into high gear. I thought, I can take all the cartoons in this book and turn them into calendars and greeting cards and T-shirts and coffee mugs. And so in

CHRISTINE’S KEYS

- Start as soon as you can.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help.
- Talk about your fears.
- Do a reality check on your fears. Ask, “What’s the worst that can happen?”
- Motivate yourself with reachable goals.
- Don’t underestimate the need for hard work.
- **Don’t forget to laugh.**



1995, The Cancer Club was born.”

The national media attention that *Not Now...I'm Having a No Hair Day!* garnered when it was published in 1996 generated a landslide of speaking requests. As a result, Clifford decided it was time to take a leap of faith and leave her job.

“I wrote a letter to 500 friends and associates and colleagues telling them that I was leaving my career to pursue my passion,” she says. “I simply asked people for help. I said, ‘Anything you can do to help me get this company off the ground – whether it’s through a donation, services, referrals, whatever you can do – please help me.’” Donations would be split 50/50 between various nonprofit cancer-related causes and developing the company.

“I dropped those 500 letters in a mailbox and then literally fell to my knees, almost in tears, thinking, ‘What did I do? I cannot believe that I have asked these people for money.’ I was mortified.”

But cancer helped put it in perspective. “Once you’ve had cancer,” she says,

“there’s not too much more that’s going to cause any great amount of fear. I always say to myself, ‘What’s the worst thing that can happen here?’ I ask that question every day.”

A \$10 check appeared in her mailbox the next day. “Within three months, \$35,000 had come into The Cancer Club,” she says. “Plus, there were offers of services and support that sustain me to this day.”

The Unlikely Entrepreneur

In many ways, Clifford was poorly prepared for entrepreneurship. In addition to struggling with her health, she really wasn’t in a financial position to take the entrepreneurial plunge. “We should all be saving or planning for that day when we want to make a change in our lives. I felt very ill-prepared to take a big risk financially.”

From the beginning, a key to her entrepreneurial success has been setting “reachable goals” – annually, monthly and weekly. She points to the National Speakers Association’s Certified Speaking


Professional designation as an example. “The day I joined NSA, I thought, ‘I’m going to be a CSP.’ It takes at least five years to become a CSP, and I did it in five years and three months. I need something to work toward.”

While she earns less than in her previous career, the feeling Clifford gets from her work more than compensates for any drop in earnings. At the core is helping people realize that they can get through the cancer experience. “I’ve gotten over 200,000 letters from people thanking me for helping them find a new attitude, a new way to approach the disease.”

She points to a letter from a woman who had seen her speak. “She was a cancer patient, hadn’t laughed or smiled in six months. Her mother was even more depressed than she was because it was her daughter who was having to go through this. When they left the event, they turned the radio on and sang songs, and started jotting down all the things that had happened to her that could be perceived as funny. She basically said that I had changed her life.”

Giving is an integral part of Clifford’s philosophy. A portion of The Cancer Club’s profit goes to nonprofit cancer-related causes, and Clifford herself has raised over \$1 million with her own charitable event, “The Christine Clifford Celebrity Golf Invitational.”

The most recent addition to her support system is her fiancé, Harry Beckwith, author of the bestseller *Selling the Invisible*. They are working on a book together about selling yourself entitled, *YOU. The Art & Science of Selling Yourself*.

Her experience has led her to constantly urge others to follow their dreams. “Unless your life has been truly touched by a serious condition, where you’ve really faced death, you do not realize how precious and fleeting life is. When you do, it’s such a gift.” 

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