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## September/October 2007 - RWM Focus

### Andrea Caruso: Sensational in Survival

*"I was more upset at the thought of not running the marathon...hair grows back...but no one was going to give me a medal...for finishing chemo."*

--Andrea Caruso

When Andrea Caruso decided to accept a nursing position in New York City, she was told she needed a complete physical. Having survived thyroid cancer just three years before at age 42, Caruso skipped her last two scheduled mammograms. When her doctor felt a suspicious lump, he ordered the mammogram immediately. In 2004, the single mother of two would endure what so many women fear—another cancer, mastectomy, reconstructive surgery and chemotherapy. Caruso needed to hear words of hope and encouragement. She could find few.

"But as a labor and delivery nurse for five years, I have learned that all things can be accomplished through stages of acceptance, faith and breaking the 'hugeness' (of the disease) into conquerable portions."

While in treatment at the James P. Wilmot Cancer Center, and in between radiation treatment and chemotherapy, Caruso found out she was accepted to run the New York City Marathon—which she had run twice before. Her doctors told her to sit this one out, saying she needed to give her body some recovery time.

Caruso was determined to run the marathon anyway. She was more upset at the thought of not doing the marathon than at the thought of losing her hair.

"After all, there are wigs and hair grows back, but no one was going to give me a medal that year for sitting it (the marathon) out and finishing chemo."

The marathon didn't compare to the "race" her body had been through medically. But she would go as far as she could, whether it was 10 feet or 10 miles, it didn't matter. She carefully glued and taped her half wig to her head. "It would be the 'Ben Franklin' look without the hat." Caruso jokes. But in 75-degree heat and just several miles into the



#### 5 Things We Haven't Told You About Andrea:

1. Flat Footed She Stands 5'10"
2. Worst Vice: Traveling to her favorite playground often to NYC.
3. What's in Her Garage: A Hyundai Santa Fe

race, she'd had enough of it, and tucked the wig to her fanny pack strap at her side. A few more miles later, she stopped and sat down on the curb to adjust her shoes. A couple of guys across the way were pointing at her and laughing. "Great," Caruso thought. "Here I am bald from cancer (treatment) and guys are making fun of me." What she didn't realize was that her wig had slid from her waist to between her legs...

Caruso shares these stories with the ease and confidence of a seasoned comedian. (She did complete the entire 26.2-mile trek, and has the medal to prove it!). She is quick to share her moments of illumination and humor without focusing on the painful times. In fact, she never talks about the pain. Instead, she wants to talk about the women in her life—friends, colleagues, others in crisis and her focus on working with and for all of them.

"Andrea views her breast cancer experience, despite the agony of it, as though she skated through it like getting a boo-boo and a Band-Aid®," says friend and fellow survivor Lisa Abbott-Cisco. Caruso's daughter, Hannah, has a similar perspective:

"It was strange, when you find out your mom has cancer, you think the world is ending, and that you would ball your eyes out. I didn't cry at all. I knew it wouldn't be a problem, that it was a stepping stone in our lives," says Hannah. "But it was a huge one at that."

But no woman who battles breast cancer has an easy time of it.

"Andrea recognizes the process can be long, painful, *and* expensive. She wants to help ease that burden for other women," adds Abbott-Cisco.

"What I want to do today is work so that others and I won't be afraid of tomorrow," says Caruso. Those words could have served as her mantra for founding Sensational In Survival (SIS), a Rochester-based organization that provides financial assistance to women diagnosed with breast cancer, and one of only three of its kind in New York. But it was her sister, Lynne Shade who was her inspiration.

"When my work leave pay was reduced, paying the bills was a crisis situation for me," recalls Caruso. Her sister told her that money should be the last thing she should have to worry about, and paid four months of her mortgage payments.

SIS started from an idea to create a breast cancer survivor calendar. A friend who is a warm-up comic for the *David Letterman Show*, Eddie Brill, saw Caruso's "bald" finish line picture of the marathon and thought there were other women's stories of triumph and survival that should be told. When the calendar was being created, the idea to create an agency to do what her sister had done for her became the channel for fundraising. Sensational In Survival launched in the spring of 2005 and has financially assisted almost 200 women in Monroe County, as well as other counties and states. SIS is a non-profit United Way designated organization with the sole focus of helping those financially strained during the battle of breast cancer. SIS helps with mortgage, rent, co-pays, medication and any expense that continues to mount, throughout the lengthy time needed for breast cancer treatment. The American Cancer Society estimates that nearly 180,000 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year, and that more than 40,000 of those diagnosed will not survive. Caruso hopes her work with SIS will change that:

"If we can ease some of the financial stress that women suffer while fighting the disease, my hope is that they will be able to focus on survival and recovery—not putting food on their kids' plates or a roof over their heads."

4. When She's Not on the Hospital Floor She's: Running on Pavement

5. Last place you'll find her: "In" a swimming pool" Caruso plans to do a biathlon specifically to avoid the swimming of a triathlon!

food on their kids' plates or a roof over their heads.

In 2006, Caruso was honored by the University of Rochester Medical Center, Department of Radiation Oncology for her zest for life and commitment to supporting people with cancer. She received the Nathaniel Rutter Inspirational Patient Award. Caruso continues her work as a labor and delivery nurse at Rochester General Hospital and on the board of SIS. She will be running her 6th consecutive New York City marathon with "Team SIS" on November 4th to raise funds for the organization. Caruso lives in Brighton and is the mother of daughters Lauren, 23 and Hannah, 18.