

# “my father saved my life”

Vanessa Silva was shocked to learn that her father had breast cancer. Then she found out that she had it too  
by Bethany Kandel

**Last October, on a blustery Saturday night in New York City,** Vanessa Silva, 34, an assistant program chair at a high school, slipped into a red sequined top, red leggings and red heels. Her father, Arnaldo Silva, 59, sporting red suspenders and a red beret, gave her a hug for luck before they stepped onstage at a Dance for the Cure fundraiser. With music booming, Vanessa and Arnaldo joined other cancer survivors, also dressed in red, to swing to the beat as the crowd gave them a standing ovation. It was

one of the best nights of Vanessa’s life—and she owed it all to her dad.

Two years before, Arnaldo, who maintains boilers at a New York City school, felt a pimple-size lump near his right nipple while taking a shower. “I kept quiet about it, but when I felt it again a few months later, it was bigger,” he says. “I

knew something wasn’t right.” His doctor told him it was fatty tissue and not to worry. However, when the lump had grown even larger five months later, Arnaldo’s wife urged him to get a second opinion.

The new doctor immediately sent him for a biopsy, sonogram and mammogram. As Arnaldo sat in the waiting room, all eyes were on him. “One of the women finally asked if I was waiting for my wife,” he says. “I said, ‘No, I’m here for me.’”

Arnaldo wasn’t sure what the tests would reveal, but he never imagined he’d hear the words *breast cancer*. “When the doctor told me, I was speechless,” he says. “I didn’t even know men could get breast cancer.” Like Arnaldo, many men aren’t aware that they can get the disease, since the incidence is low. Of the estimated 182,460 cases of invasive breast cancer diagnosed in 2008, only 1,990 were in men, according to the American Cancer Society. Although breast cancer in men is rare, it’s often deadly, experts say. “Many men are diagnosed at a much later stage (Please turn to 106)

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than women,” says Sharon Rosenbaum Smith, MD, a breast surgeon at St. Luke’s Roosevelt Hospital in New York City, who treats both Arnaldo and Vanessa. “Men think that they’re immune because it’s a ‘woman’s disease.’ So when they develop a lump, they tend to ignore it. By the time we see them it’s already palpable and at an advanced stage.”

Luckily, Arnaldo’s cancer was caught at stage II. He had a mastectomy to remove all the breast tissue and most of the lymph nodes in that area. Chemotherapy would soon follow. He felt optimistic, but he had a new worry: His doctors told him that he should be tested for BRCA1 and BRCA2, gene mutations that put you at a higher risk of developing breast or ovarian cancer. If he had a mutation, chances were his kids did too. The presence of BRCA1 or BRCA2 in men ups the risk for their daughters and sisters (as well as their sons and brothers). Arnaldo prayed that he wasn’t a carrier. But the test showed that he was BRCA2-positive. His three kids now needed to be tested to see if they carried the gene too. Vanessa and her brother both tested positive.

“That was my darkest moment,” Arnaldo says. “I had passed this on to my kids.” But instead of blaming him, Vanessa, a mom of three, thanked him. “I keep telling him that he saved my life and my brother’s,” she says. “If he hadn’t found out about his cancer, I probably would have waited until I was 40 to get a mammogram.”

Instead, she had a baseline mammogram at 32, at Dr. Rosenbaum Smith’s suggestion, while she awaited her

genetic test results. Like her dad, Vanessa was shocked by the findings: She had Stage 0, DCIS (ductal carcinoma in situ) in her left breast, which meant that the cancer cells were confined to the milk ducts and hadn’t spread. However, her doctor had also found an area suspicious for micro-invasion and a lymph node that was positive for metastatic cells. So, with her husband’s support, Vanessa made the difficult decision to have a bilateral mastectomy (removal of both breasts). “I didn’t want to hear 10 years down the road that the cancer had come back,” she says. “I wanted to be done with it.”

Since there was evidence that the disease had spread to a node, her doctors recommended chemotherapy. “I knew how difficult it was,” she says. “My aunt had had the treatments and she was always nauseous, vomiting and weak. It brought back bad memories.”

Even harder for Vanessa was the day she and her husband had to tell their children about it. “That was the first time I cried,” recalls Vanessa. “My older son thought I was going to die. I told him that I was going to take medicine to get better, even though it might make me sick in the process.”

Vanessa and her dad went through the grueling chemo treatments together and it

made them closer. “Now I consider Vanessa my friend even more than my daughter,” says Arnaldo. “If I’m tired or depressed, she understands better than anyone.”

However, there are some things Vanessa will never truly understand. Arnaldo admits that in many ways it’s been a lonely journey for him as a man with breast cancer. “It’s still taboo,” he says. “Nobody wants to talk about it.” He’s yet to meet another man with the disease.

Vanessa, on the other hand, finds empathy from the other female survivors at the hospital’s Comprehensive Breast Center, which offers such wellness activities as yoga and dancing. “There’s so much out there for women, but my dad feels all alone,” she says. So she was thrilled when he began coming to the center too. Since Arnaldo hasn’t found a group for men with his diagnosis, he occasionally joins the women in their activities. “They welcomed me with open arms.”

**Today father and daughter are both in remission**, and Arnaldo is spreading the word about the risks of male breast cancer, speaking at the school where he works. “If my story causes even one guy to check himself, then I’ve done my job.” *(Please turn to 110)*