Living Up to the Lipstick

In the two decades since her breast-cancer diagnosis, Geralyn Lucas C'89 has become an icon and inspiration to fellow survivors for her flamboyant and gleefully defiant response to her disease. It all started with her choice of lipstick to wear for her mastectomy. *By Alyson Krueger*

At 6:33 a.m. on the day after her 28th birthday, Geralyn Lucas C'89 put on bright red lipstick.

She was in a dressing cubicle at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, getting ready to be wheeled into surgery for her mastectomy. The hope was that cutting off her right breast would save her from an aggressive form of breast cancer.

It had only been a few weeks since her diagnosis, but Lucas felt the life she had so carefully shaped for herself slipping away. Already she could barely remember when her biggest concern was getting her boss at ABC's *20/20*, where she was assistant story editor, to like an idea for a segment. Or going out to dinner with her handsome husband Tyler, a surgeon, and talking about their respective days rather than what chemotherapy course would be best for her.

Most of all, she was preoccupied by fears about how she would live without one of her breasts. Would Tyler still find her attractive? Would the construction workers on the street be so repulsed that *even they* would stop whistling at her? When she stopped to analyze her anxieties, she found them quite optimistic. They assumed she would live at all.

As she put on her hospital gown, hairnet, and paper slippers, new questions slipped into her mind. How would she wake up from surgery? What if she couldn't handle the pain? What if the operation itself, rather than the cancer, ended up killing her? In that moment, she needed courage desperately, and she needed it fast.

She needed to put on bright red lipstick.

It wasn't a color she would have picked out herself. She'd gotten it as a free gift with another purchase, and had tried it for the first time a few days before her diagnosis. After that, she never left home without it.

 PHOTOGRAPH BY CANDACE DICARLO

Applying lipstick may not seem like a daring act, but for Lucas it symbolized becoming the person she always wanted to be. "Lipstick was reserved for movie stars, rocker chicks, magazine-ad models, and a certain type of woman that I knew I was not," she would recall in her 2004 memoir, *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy.* "It felt obvious and too bold and shouted, 'Look at me!' I didn't have the self-confidence and couldn't pull it off."

But now it was time to at least *try* to be that bold, self-confident person.

After her surgery, as Lucas struggled to come out of anesthesia, she recalled one of the nurses saying, "Girl, what kind of lipstick are you wearing? That shit stayed on for your six-hour surgery!"

Her lipstick didn't fail, and neither would she.

Some 19 years later, on a freezing, rainy day this past November, Lucas stood at a podium on the third floor of the Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem. With a mix of tears and laughter, she told the assembled breast-cancer patients, survivors, doctors, and nurses the story of how that tube of lipstick had changed her life.

The courage it gave her in the operating room carried over into the rest of her life as she fought to keep her friends, her job, and her relationship in the face of her disease. The old Geralyn, she says, was scared to cry in front of people, terrified to show any sign of vulnerability. The new her went hysterical in public, over-sharing with guys at coffee carts about her medical predicament and pounding her head on tables at fancy restaurants. (That happened in the place her mother and husband took her, to cheer her up, after a bone scan to determine if the cancer had spread to any other part of her body.) She worked even harder in her job, managing to earn a promotion even while undergoing chemo and fighting the exhaustion, nausea, and physical transformation that goes with it. Following her mastectomy and reconstructive surgery, she drew on new sources of femininity. Her skirts got shorter, her heels higher, her sweaters tighter, and her lips more red. Her self-esteem soared in a way she had never experienced.

During her chemotherapy, a colleague at work complimented her cool baseball hat-and-suit ensemble. "I am reappearing," she wrote in her memoir. "I have a cast a spell over my own life. I have willed myself to find my magic that must still be there. Despite the baldness and one boob and occasional heave, I am charming. I have met my mojo."

Lucas has spread her "lipstick manifesto" to fellow survivors through countless talks and in a variety of media, old and new. A couple of years after her memoir came out, it was made into an Emmy-nominated TV-movie that aired on the Lifetime cable network, where Lucas was director of original programming at the time, in 2006. A second memoir, *Then Came Life: Living with Courage, Spirit, and Gratitude after Breast Cancer*, appeared last year. Her website, geralynlucas.com, has links to the books, her Twitter feed, and a video she did to encourage women to get mammograms.

Lucas was recently profiled in *The New York Times* Style section, in a story that recounted her raucous trip—in the company of fashion designer Betsey Johnson and Johson's daughter, among others—to get tattoos. Lucas's first tattoo, which she got in 1997, was a winged heart that marks where her mastectomy incision ends, and she has gotten several others since. This latest one, the *Times* story notes, was a star in memory of two recent cancer victims, a cousin of Lucas's and Evelyn Lauder, "a creator of the pink ribbon synonymous with breast cancer awareness."

The Estée Lauder Companies created a lipstick in Lucas's honor, and Johnson, herself a breast-cancer survivor, sponsors "Courage Nights" where others gather to put on makeup and provide mutual encouragement.

In 2013, Lucas convinced ABC television network to launch "ABC News Goes Pink." The initiative—which began with a day of coverage across the network's news shows focusing on the hard facts of breast cancer and continued through Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October—was repeated in 2014.

At book signings, hospital visits, and support groups around the world she has told her story of finding femininity and courage through such a simple act. Breast cancer victims have flocked to her and her message, asking Lucas to meet them when they were down and sit with them during their treatments. When she showed up to a book signing in a black velvet skirt with huge red lips, women asked to borrow it. Lucas let them—and says she is considering starting a program similar to the popular book series and movie, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, envisioning that women would borrow the skirt and then pass it along to someone who needs it next. She has even met women in bathrooms to show them what a reconstructed breast looks like.

"Her impact was huge," says Susan Drossman C'84, a partner in Schaffner, Schonholz & Drossman, LLP, a diagnostic radiology practice in Manhattan; she is Lucas's radiologist. "To have someone who says, 'I went through this, I'm maintaining my sexuality, I'm wearing a low-cut shirt, here is my tattoo over there that reminds me of my experience.' She is really great at empowering other people."

When Lucas finished speaking at Metropolitan Hospital, women came up one by one and shared with her how they had read her book and bought their own tubes of lipstick. She sat as transfixed as they had been for her, offering words of encouragement and love only when they were finished talking. When one patient said she had just come from the chemo room, Lucas made the crowd give her a standing ovation. Another she called an angel. Another a warrior.

"I don't know how she gets all the energy," says Nicole Patterson, head of the Zeta Tau Alpha Foundation, which works with Lucas to reach college-aged women with information about their risk for breast cancer. Patterson declares that she was "exhausted" after attending a similar talk given by Lucas, "and I wasn't even experiencing it."

Lucas didn't seem to notice the event went two-and-a-half-hours over its allotted time. For her, it's all part of "living up to the lipstick."

Lucas claims that before cancer struck she was more of a "gloss girl"—a follow-the-rules, color-within-the-lines type of person.

It may well be true that the first time she stepped into a strip club, as she has written, was the day when she was deciding whether to have a mastectomy. She wanted to experience first hand the enticement of boobs before committing to remove one of hers. And it's a good bet that she had never flashed millions of

strangers (or even one) before posing topless after her breast reconstruction for a story titled, "What Happens When You Live: The Face of Survivorship," in *Self* magazine's November 2005 issue.

But while Lucas may have gotten bolder after breast cancer, she was never someone who blended easily into a crowd.

"She had the coolest feathered bangs and hair, and she was constantly flipping it," recalls Caryn Karmatz Rudy C'92, a longtime friend and now Lucas's literary agent, who vividly remembers Lucas being in the spotlight at an overnight sleepover camp near their hometown of Wynnewood, Pennsylvania. There were skits parodying the hair flipping, but it was endearing. "I'm still laughing as I think about everybody flipping their hair trying to be like Geralyn. She was very cool. People were definitely laughing with her, not making fun of her."

Her father, Harvey Weiner GrS'74, remembers being taken aback by the rousing, impromptu speech his daughter gave after winning the Optimist Award in her high school. "I was like, 'Where did that come from?'" he says.

And it doesn't sound like she ever *avoided* the spotlight. While she was an undergraduate, Lucas and her friends attended an Elvis Costello concert in Irvine Auditorium. His assistant, dressed as a werewolf, was carrying people from the audience up on to the stage—and chose Lucas. Costello poured her a cup of Gatorade, asked what song he should sing, and then serenaded her with "Alison," while she danced in front of everyone. "I was called Alison on campus for three days," remembers Lucas, clearly reliving every moment.

She was also always someone who took up causes, from convincing her younger brothers, Paul and Howard, to share their Halloween candy equally to writing op-eds in her high-school newspaper against hazing. At Penn she worked to promote safe sex, handing out condoms on the sidewalk.

"I remember getting a delivery of a thousand Trojans the day my philosophy professor came over to tutor me," she says. "I was so embarrassed."

On behalf of Penn People Pro Choice, Lucas organized a trip to Washington for a big march. Her former roommate Amie Hadden C'89 remembers Lucas trying—passionately—to convince all the girls in the house join her. "'Let's do this! We can make a difference!'" she recalls Lucas saying to them. And how they mumbled, "Sounds great," in response, and went back to planning which frat parties to attend.

I Think I Am Ready

My lipstick is all I have.

I'm clinging to that thin film of beeswax or paraffin or whatever ingredients lipstick is made of. That thin layer of color, of moisture, of hope is all I have that is mine when they put the oxygen mask on my face to put me under. I am holding on so tight to that hyper-red-notice-me-now pigment that is screaming that I am out of context because I do not deserve to be in this operating room having my breast cut off.

I want my lipstick to tell everyone in this room that I think I have a future and I know I will wear lipstick again, but on my terms next time. But for now, I have my war paint. I think I am ready. I glide my tongue one last time over the smooth surface and I taste the lipstick in my mouth and it is mingling with the anesthesia cloud that has made me very sleepy and then—I am out.

From *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy,* by Geralyn Lucas.

Lucas credits studying at the Annenberg School for Communication with professors like Larry Gross (now vice dean at USC Annenberg) with pointing her toward a career in journalism.

"It was so big-picture about media's role in society, and I think it was the defining influence in my life," she says. "They talked about media and culture and responsibility. I always took the media role very seriously. Every time I've done journalism, I've tried to think positive, I've tried to tell a story that made a difference."

After graduating from Penn, Lucas earned a master's degree at Columbia University's School of Journalism, then secured her dream job as assistant story editor at Barbara Walter's *20/20* program at ABC News. (She would later become a producer and eventually head of original programming at Lifetime; these days she works full-time as an author and advocate.)

At ABC, she told stories about Amish runaways, kids who wanted to meet their sperm-donor dads, even a woman who had 27 plastic surgeries to look like Barbie. While some made more of a splash than others, she hung onto the belief that every story she told could and would make a difference in someone's life.

So when the news of her breast cancer arrived with no warning, and with such serious potential consequences, along with confronting her personal trauma over her diagnosis she also knew she had to share the experience—especially with other young women. "This was a hidden story," she says. "I didn't even know you could get breast cancer so young. As a story teller, how could I not tell this?"

Besides her journalist's instinct for an important story, Lucas has a powerful need—call it an addiction—to help people, her friends and family say. "We have to tell her once in a while to save some of her energy and concentrate on some of the issues that are important to her, as opposed to giving so much of herself to others," says her father. When she was first diagnosed she used to go to support groups and try to solve everyone else's problems.

Or sometimes non-problems. Rudy remembers how Lucas arranged a lunch meeting between her and Sarah Chalke—the *Scrubs* actress who played Lucas in the film version of *Why I Wore Lipstick To My Mastectomy*—because Chalke had expressed an interest in writing. "There are a million ways this person who was a Hollywood actress could have written a book, but Geralyn is just the ultimate helper and connecter. She can't even stop herself," Rudy says.

Lucas found the lump in her breast while doing a self-exam in the shower. At first, her family and friends thought she was being a hypochondriac. When she finally got it checked out, not one but two doctors cried when they saw her biopsy results, in which a

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number of factors pointed to a very aggressive cancer. "I so vividly remember looking at that scan," says Drossman. "If it were a 50-year-old woman I know how this will turn out, but this is a funky, beautiful girl—a girl-woman—who had her life ahead of her."

Thanks in part to the efforts of advocates like Lucas, these days a great amount of attention is placed on young people's breast cancer risk. The Young Survival Coalition spreads the message that under-40s do get breast cancer, and Stupid Cancer sponsors an annual informational and social networking conference, CancerCon (formerly the OMG! Cancer Summit), and other resources targeted to young adults. Zeta Tau Alpha and other sororities make it their mission to teach each sister about breast cancer, and celebrities like Angelina Jolie and the *Today* show's Amy Robach have raised awareness as well.

Roughly 5 percent of invasive breast cancer cases occur in women younger than 40, and research shows they react differently to the disease than their older counterparts. For example, a 2006 study by Donald Baucom, at the University of North Carolina, found that younger women are more likely to have negative feelings toward their body, more sexual concerns, and experience greater depression and anxiety as a result of breast cancer.

"For someone that young to be diagnosed, it really rocks your world," says Drossman. "The issues that come up in younger women are so much more significant in terms of fertility, your own sexuality, your self esteem. How do you go through life with this kind of diagnosis?"

Studies also show that the prognosis for women under 40 tends to be slightly worse than for women between 40 and 70. Their cancers are more likely to be fast-growing, higher-grade, and hormone receptor-negative, which means they are more aggressive and require more stringent treatments.

None of this was on anyone's radar screen when Lucas was diagnosed in 1996. Besides not realizing that breast cancer could affect women in their twenties, she assumed it was largely hereditary. "I thought your mom had to have it. I didn't realize 85 to 90 percent of cases have no family history," she recalls. "I found all this out the hard way."

Lucas began her work serving as a resource for others when her doctors started asking her to talk to newly diagnosed patients in their 20s or 30s to tell them what she went through and how she survived. When "it wasn't practical to meet women in bathrooms anymore," she says, she wrote the memoir, which has been translated into seven languages.

By then she was working at Lifetime, and convinced her new employer to make the movie version. Besides Chalke, who played her, the film starred Patti LaBelle in the role of a woman named Moneisha who is also going through chemotherapy alongside Lucas, and featured a song by Pink titled, "I Am Not My Hair." The film was nominated for an Emmy for outstanding made-for-television movie. From there, she successfully pitched her old employers on her idea for ABC News Goes Pink.

Through her work Lucas started realizing there were specific problems she could help address. Women she spoke to said they opted out of mammograms because they hurt too badly. That prompted Lucas to make her video, the "Ouch Challenge," for which she underwent seven of womankind's common ordeals—from beauty treatments to tight clothing and pinching footwear—that were even more painful. She got a Brazilian wax treatment (on a scale of 1 to 10, the pain "was off the charts," she reports. "Tyler was happy, but I couldn't walk for two weeks"), put on Spanx ("I thought I did organ damage"), danced in high heels, had her eyebrows threaded, and got a tattoo—and then got a much less painful mammogram. So far, the video—which won a Webby award from the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences in 2011—has gotten more than 20,000 views on YouTube.

A great proponent of the value of early detection, Lucas also takes *everyone* to get mammograms: her web designer, her computer repair person, her yoga instructor. A friend told me that Lucas once took a cab driver off the street to get one.

When I ask her about it, Lucas replies, "There have been so many women I have taken to get mammograms, it is very possible." She's cracking up, but the sad reality is that a few of these women have actually been diagnosed.

With every project and partnership she's formed—from fashion powerhouses like Betsey Johnson and Estee Lauder, to the American Cancer Association, the Zeta Tau Alpha Foundation, and local support groups across the country—Lucas has become the face of this new generation of breast cancer survivors, who are sexy, feisty, and full of life. "That is where Geralyn is fantastic—

being an advocate for the young group of people," says Drossman.

So it was only natural that when *Self* was looking for a young woman to represent survivorship for an article in the magazine, they turned to Lucas. The photo-shoot was done by legendary photographer Mary Ellen Mark FA'62 ASC'64 Hon'94, who saw at once that she had to portray this young woman who took a near-death experience and turned it into an opportunity to really live. "I just wanted to show her at her best," says Mark. "She is a real force of life … and she was not hiding the ordeal that she went through."

Lucas's initiatives feel so much like pep rallies or sleepovers, it's hard to imagine anyone finding fault with them. I attended three events where she spoke. I simultaneously felt terrified I would get breast cancer and optimistic that if I ever did, it would be OK. But she deals with some tricky issues fiercely debated in that community.

For instance, there is an ongoing debate over the effectiveness of mammograms and about the age women should start being tested. The US Preventive Services Task Force, an independent expert group that reviews research and makes recommendations, says that screening for most women should start at 50, but the American Cancer Society and others recommend starting at 40.

The problem is that mammography tends to misconstrue findings in young people because their breast tissue is denser, which makes it harder to detect possible cancer. ("It's like looking for a polar bear in a snowstorm," explains Lucas.) Proponents of starting screening at 50 contend that too many 40-somethings are misdiagnosed, a process that involves emotional and physical trauma.

The other side counters that mammography picks up a lot more than it misses, and it can save lives by detecting cancer early. "On my part there should be no debate," says Drossman. "You are missing a huge amount of breast cancers, when we can have the most impact."

(Further complicating the picture with regard to the overall effectiveness of mammography in preventing deaths from breast cancer are the results of a large, long-term Canadian study, announced in February 2014 and published in the *British Medical Journal*, which showed that annual mammograms did not statistically affect the risk of dying from breast cancer among women aged 40-59 when compared to physical examinations. The study also concluded that 22 percent of the cancers discovered in the annual-mammogram group were misdiagnosed as being potentially life-threatening.)

Lucas's choice of treatment for her cancer is another point of contention. According to Susan Brown, managing director of health and science education at the Susan G. Komen Foundation, mastectomies—especially double mastectomies—have become a trend in recent years. She attributes this to "better reconstructive surgery, the use of genetic testing, [and] the Angelina Jolie effect. Society has changed based on what we know scientifically and what's OK culturally."

The problem is that scientific studies show that the invasive procedure does not increase longevity, and many women are choosing this option for emotional reasons. They don't want to live with the risk that their cancer could come back, or spread to a second breast. While some doctors see that as a legitimate rationale, others believe it isn't medically sound.

Personally, Lucas speaks with pride of her mastectomy. She also went her own way in deciding to have children after her treatment, which was another controversial choice. Doctor after doctor told her it was too risky, that the high levels of hormones could trigger more cancer. But she took the risk. Lucas and her husband have a girl and a boy—Skye, who is now 15 years old, and Hayden, who is eight. Her journey after breast cancer, and especially her struggle to keep appreciating her miracle children as she deals with the day-to-day stresses of managing a family, is the focus of *Then Came Life,* her 2014 memoir.

While she is happy to talk about her own decisions, Lucas never weighs in on someone else's medical case. When patients call and ask her questions, she tells them how complicated the answers are. "I'm not a doctor," she says. "But this is what happened to me, this is my experience." Even so, there is a danger that women look up to shining, confident people like Lucas or Angelina Jolie and want to do what they did without thinking for themselves.

"I do think that advocates have a great opportunity, because they are a face to go with a story," says the Komen Foundation's Brown. "There can also be some risks associated with that, and hopefully women will make a personal decision along with her healthcare provider, and not with a celebrity."

Karuna Jaggar, executive director of BCAction, a watchdog organization that tries to make sure breast-cancer advocacy is fair to all groups, worries that vocal survivors, as well-intentioned as they are, might be causing more harm than good. "The ugly, painful, angry, scared victim of breast cancer is really negated and scarred by this [flood] of cheerfulness and the message that women should be positive, put on their makeup, put on a good face," she says. "Then we are told, 'If you fight hard you'll survive'—and the really bad, devastating truth is that 40,000 women die each year [of breast cancer] and that's nothing to be lighthearted about. We are really doing women a disservice through a lot of these messages."

Lucas understands such criticisms, but firmly believes that the benefits of sharing her story with others, especially young women, outweigh any harm. Her advocacy efforts are also part of her ongoing personal struggle with breast cancer. She gets annual mammograms, an exercise that's growing scarier for her, as friends who have been cancer-free for more than 30 years are just now having relapses. She's had terrifying moments when her tumor markers were up or they found "unfriendly" nodules on parts of her body. She still wonders if she should have gotten a double mastectomy—to take away the worry that her other breast might kill her.

A 23-year-old graduate of Penn's engineering school, who recently finished chemo for her breast cancer and who met with Lucas several times during the ordeal, sums up the reality: "It's always going to be part of your life, and it's never going to escape you, and you're never really going to get over it. That's why I understand where she is coming from when she decided to make it her life. It does take over."

Telling her personal story and advocating for women is part of what keeps Lucas sane, and hopeful. "I think any time I'm out there, and I meet someone, it heals me a little more," she says. "It helps me make sense of my life." ◆

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