

MY LONG WALK TO WELLNESS



The loss of her unborn twins followed by a devastating breast cancer diagnosis has given Amanda Power the strength to tackle one of the greatest challenges on earth – the Great Wall of China

A few months ago, I struggled to walk to our front gate. In April, I plan to trek 85km across the Great Wall of China, and where it has crumbled and vanished, I will walk over mountains and through valleys to reach my goal.

I am taking on this challenge for other women like me who have been diagnosed with, or who are living with, breast cancer. I want to show them that, unbelievable as it may seem, things do get better.

But let me start at the beginning...

My husband, Richard, and I have known each other since high school. In our 20s we travelled overseas together, getting engaged in Norfolk, England before returning to home to marry and build our careers.

It wasn't without real thought and excitement that we decided to start a family, but this proved a challenge from the very beginning; we spent many years with specialist fertility doctors until our first in-vitro fertilisation proved successful. I fell pregnant with twins. What a moment of pure joy.

We went for all the necessary scans, how amazing to see two little heartbeats. I will never forget what they sounded like and am lucky enough to have them recorded.

We loved our twins with all our hearts from the very beginning and I felt so proud and fulfilled.

However, half way through my pregnancy my waters broke. I was hospitalised and six weeks later our children were born prematurely. I find it too painful to go back on my notes from that time as I haven't yet reached a place where I am strong enough to do so. So I am writing from a shocked and battered memory.

I was lucky enough to experience giving birth. We held our own two babies in our arms for a few moments before they were lost to us forever. I was able to look down on the two perfect little beings that Richard and I had created and feel that sense of awe and absolute adoration that every parent must feel. We think of our two little angels each and every day of our lives and we talk about them often, even three and a half years later. Christopher and Gemma impacted on our lives forever.

In the years that followed I had three more in-vitro fertilisations and six artificial inseminations, but sadly none succeeded.

I am no longer able to have children of my own but there is always hope at the end

of a dark tunnel and for me that hope is my beautiful, younger sister, Tessa, who has offered to carry a surrogate pregnancy for me when the time is right.

In August 2007, our lives took another devastating turn.

After two clear biopsies taken on a lump in my breast I went into hospital to have what I was assured was a harmless growth removed, and came home with a breast cancer diagnosis. I was 35 and my life and that of my family, had changed forever. It is thought my cancer may have been caused by the very strong hormone treatment I was on for many years, but I have always maintained that I would never change the experience, as tough as it was and even with the results we had.

I had two operations followed by chemotherapy.

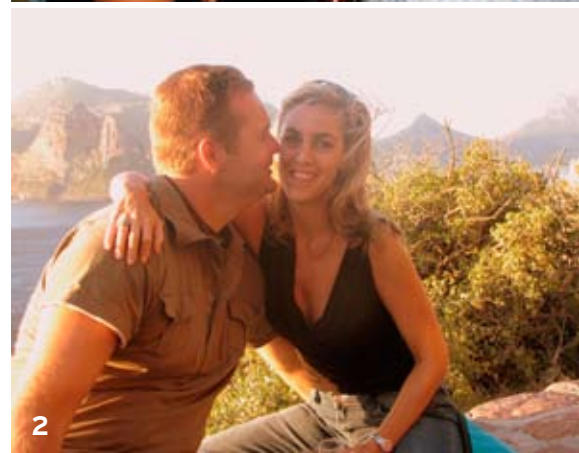
My brother, his wife, my sister and baby nephew flew home from England to be with me for my first chemotherapy – which was something I never once had to endure alone. One of the gifts this disease gave me was that it enabled me to meet my precious little nephew Joshua and experience a few months of him as a baby. I cannot tell you what a welcome distraction he was for all of us over my first three months of treatment.

Richard was with me for each of my six treatments as were my father, mother, brother Nick, or sister Tessa. This feeling of love was sometimes overwhelming, especially since have a friend whose husband missed every single one of her chemotherapy sessions.

My never being alone was one of the reasons why I was able to cope. Every three weeks I had a hand holding mine. I didn't ever need to sit and read during chemotherapy; a book would never have replaced the personal touch my family brought.

Chemotherapy made me very ill and a shadow of the person I once was. I was hospitalised and bedridden on a couple of occasions, but I still managed to go out

1. Our 6th wedding anniversary, March '07
2. A romantic moment on Chapman's Peak Drive, April '07
3. Richard by my side after my first operation, August 23, 2007
4. My amazing mom, Dot. My devoted family and husband were at my side throughout my treatment





and celebrate special times with my family and husband. I even went to a few wine festivals, and threw a special 30th birthday party for my sister.

Of course I had to deal with the horror of losing my hair. Now I know why many people say “just shave it off”. I partly heeded the advice and had my fairly long hair cut quite short. Still this did nothing to quell the shock as clumps of hair fell out in my hands as I ran them over my head. I was particularly terrified of the wind blowing; I didn’t want to lose my hair on one of our outings to a wine festival!

My wonderful hairdresser Anita came to my parents’ house, where I lived while having treatment – that way I didn’t have to feel the embarrassment of having my head shaved in a public place. It reminded me of school days when the chair was placed on top of newspaper on the kitchen floor. As usual everyone was there to support me. My hairdresser was gentle and everyone was so encouraging, “you have a lovely head”, and “perfect ears” they would say. It took three days for me to look in the mirror.

I won’t ever forget an amazing personal experience my father and I had. Anita had just finished shaving the last bit of hair and everyone was voicing their encouragement, but I could see through it and saw the pain in all of their eyes. My dad hadn’t come into the kitchen; it was his way of coping, and I went to find him in the lounge. I needed a hug from that loving man who gave me life and always reassured me. He gave me the best hug I have had in years and we cried and sobbed. When I walked away I felt like I could face the world again, if my dad approved of the way I looked, everybody would. I went away with new confidence.

Richard, my love and my strength, was also full of encouragement and compliments. I’m pretty sure he was sometimes embarrassed, just as I was, but never once did he let on. Rather, he diligently explained

my situation to all who asked and I never had to endure the pain of retelling my story, until I was ready to do so.

My mom was and still is, my rock. I was bald for about a week when my mother finally persuaded me to accompany her to the mall. She didn’t rush me; instead she allowed me take my time. We sat in the parking lot for about 15 minutes, until she once again reassured me that no one would look at me but when they did, she taught me that I had the strength deep inside to face those staring eyes.

In my second month of treatment I was physically weak and exhausted. Although my friend Heidi only lived across the road, it took all my strength (and that of my

When I walked away I felt like I could face the world again, if my dad approved of my looks everybody would

mother and sister) to walk me there.

I remember sitting buffered by cushions at the garden table watching my friends and family, yet feeling so detached. I will never forget the look of pity, sorrow and helplessness in Heidi’s eyes, as well as the true worry on my mom’s face that day. I desperately wanted to change that image; to show them that I could be a fit, happy, bubbly and fun-loving person who is able to fight this illness and overcome any obstacle. I appreciated all of the concern, but I never wanted to be pitied.

I used to think chemotherapy was out to kill me but I have discovered I was wrong;

instead it gave me so much. It gave me my life. This disease has given me a strength I never knew I had, along with resilience, determination, hope, trust, love, understanding and compassion.

I am determined to be an old lady who looks back on her life full of wonder at her achievements – both large and small.

CANCER HAS BROUGHT WITH IT NEW hobbies and interests, like the China Challenge, which Richard and I will undertake in April. We like to think that we are no different to anybody else yet in some ways we are; we have lived and survived many challenges that few people our age have had to endure.

The China Challenge is a fundraiser and we are two of 32 - including 30 women - ranging in age from 36-61 years, hiking 85km along the Great Wall of China.

Our Challenge is aimed at raising awareness and funds for breast cancer patients and research worldwide. It is a tangible way to show that we can make a difference and to celebrate the courage of survivors (and their families) affected by cancer.

There are so many people I want to achieve this life goal for: for Richard, my knight in shining armour throughout. I know if it gets too tough he’ll carry me as he always has; for my parents and family who cried many tears behind closed doors but always put on a brave face when I was near. Those tears have formed a giant wave which I plan to ride on for the rest of my life; friends who have taught me the meaning of true friendship and devotion.

It’s also going to be wonderful to prove to myself just how resilient I can be.

We’ll be hiking for up to eight hours a day – quite unbelievable when you think that I struggled to reach my own front gate just a few short months ago – and our journey will cover 100 000 steps.

We’ll encounter sunshine, rain and snow,



How many women climb their own mountains, each and every day, in their fight against breast cancer. It's time to show the world that we care

walking through varying and challenging terrain – farming areas, small rural country towns and national parks. The path – as with life – varies from rough trails to mightily constructed and renovated sections of the Wall, wide enough to have taken six horses abreast.

Helping each other along will help each of us overcome our own limitations and fears, and I have no doubt I'll establish life-long friendships

I'll have Richard by my side; and this is another great challenge for us to reach together. What an amazing story we'll have to tell our grandchildren one day...

Our motto is: "It is so easy to forget how we battled what mountains we climbed".

Last year's Challenge raised just over R1-million. The charity Richard and I have committed to raising sponsorship for is St Luke's Hospice, which provides palliative care to terminally ill patients and their families. Hospice is about the quality of living with an illness that can't be cured.

Being involved in the China Challenge has given me a personal taste of the hardships of raising sponsorship, and how charities have to fight to survive (especially with the

current world recession looming).

Richard and I are in the process of gathering the names of 85 newly-diagnosed breast cancer patients aged 20–40. At every kilometre, we will pin a breast cancer ribbon bearing the name of one young woman onto our backpacks.

This is our way of showing support. We'll be carrying her along with us both physically, in a sense, and spiritually.

I have always believed that if you go through anything, even a difficulty like cancer, something good can come out of it. I have come to realise that it's not so much what happens in your life, but how you deal with it.

I have also come to realise that health is a gift not to be squandered and that your attitude determines your day.

How many women climb their own mountain, each and every day, in their fight against breast cancer. It's time to show the world that we care. ☺



5. My last photo with long hair
6. Anita, my hairdresser, came to our home to shave off my hair
7. A happy night out with the family
8. Chemotherapy: which vein shall we use this time?
9. Richard was a constant support
10. My sister Tessa and I enjoying a much-needed holiday at Langebaan
11. Celebrating my sister's birthday with my gorgeous nephew Joshua
12. Going into my first radiation session
13. Celebrating my 36th birthday with my best friends
14. My mom, Dot, always there for me
15. Getting stronger at last

You, too, can help raise funds for St Luke's...

Account Name: St Luke's Hospice (Fundraising no. NPO 007-350/9399)

Bank: Standard Bank, Claremont, Cape Town Branch Code: 025109

Account No: 071884130, ref no: GL076/ Initial & Surname

or contact St Luke's Hospice, Megan Engelbrecht, fundraising assistant

Email: fundraising@stlukes.co.za

Telephone: 021-763 3147

