

## She Drew The Line At Maybe To Save Her Own Life

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Lindsay Avner, 25  
Founder, Bright Pink  
Chicago, Illinois, United States

The memories of Lindsay Avner's grandmother and great-grandmother are always with her. Her mother and father's support is always with her. Those who have struggled, survived and died from breast cancer are always with her.

Avner, of Chicago, found out one day in a doctor's office that she had a chance to continue on with a heart wrenching family history. Avner's mother, Wendy, is a breast and ovarian cancer survivor. Her grandmother, Lillian and great-grandmother, Sandra, died of breast cancer a week apart in 1971.

A family history meant Avner could have been the fourth generation to be diagnosed with breast cancer. Her fears were proven true in June 2005, when she tested positive for a mutation on the BRCA1, or breast cancer 1, gene.

To be clear, Avner was never diagnosed with breast cancer. Genetically speaking, however, there was a big chance she would.

Those with the BRCA1 mutation account for less than 10 percent of breast and ovarian cancer cases. That means the majority of breast cancer cases aren't inherited. However, those with a gene mutation are still 85 percent likelier to have breast cancer than those without the mutation.

"You're not talking about may or may not," Avner said. "It's pretty much within the stars."

Breast cancer is the No. 1 cause of cancer death among women worldwide. Approximately 502,000 women across the globe die of the disease each year, the fifth highest cause of cancer death for women and men, according to the World Health Organization. While breast cancer cases for men are statistically rare, they do happen.

And Avner wasn't about to have the next diagnosis.

In August 2006, Avner, then 23 and perfectly healthy, underwent a double preventive mastectomy at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. In other words, she had both, cancerless breasts removed. The surgery is believed to greatly reduce, if not eliminate, the chance for breast cancer.

In January 2007, Avner became a public advocate for breast and ovarian cancer awareness. She began Bright Pink, a Chicago-based, all-volunteer nonprofit organization intended to educate young women about the diseases.

Avner recently spoke with The Leader World about the decisions that changed her life and led her to start Bright Pink.

The Leader World: Breast cancer is an extremely touchy subject for women. Many choose to keep their diagnoses and suffering private. Why did you take your story public?

Avner: For me, it wasn't like that right away. Going into the surgery, there were eight people who knew about it. I thought, "I'm single, how am I ever going to go on a date?" It was also, I didn't know the end result. I felt like I had this awful secret. By me being able to talk about it openly after the surgery, with the peace of mind it brought me, it made me feel like it was something I shouldn't feel ashamed about. I told my boyfriend at the time,

&lsquo;I have this gene&rsquo;. My mom was surprised I would say it to someone, like, &lsquo;I can&rsquo;t believe you&rsquo;d share that.&rsquo; This is something you need to take on a massive support system.

The Leader World: How did you feel when you woke up after the double mastectomy? You can share as much as you&rsquo;re willing.

Avner: I don&rsquo;t remember a lot, but my mom said that I said, &lsquo;Mom, I knew it was going to be OK.&rsquo; The first two days, I was in the hospital. Every deep breath I took, I felt like there was an elephant stomping my chest. It was really important for me to have the same surgeon as my mom, Dr. Patrick Borgen. This was the guy who saved my mom&rsquo;s life.

The Leader World: How did the organization get started?

Avner: There was kind of this big media buzz after the surgery. [Editor&rsquo;s note: Avner&rsquo;s story was first profiled in October 2006 by the Chicago Tribune and New York Post.] After being picked up by CNN, from that, there were over 500 young women who said, &lsquo;give me this girl&rsquo;s e-mail. What&rsquo;s this girl&rsquo;s phone number?&rsquo; To me, it felt very significant. Not everybody had this gene. There was this outpouring of response. I thought, &lsquo;there&rsquo;s a lot of breast cancer organizations, but no one&rsquo;s talking to these young women who are high-risk.&rsquo;

The Leader World: How many people are involved in Bright Pink?

Avner: We have over 100 volunteers. We have a board of directors of five younger professionals who are superstars in their fields. We have five more seasoned professional. That&rsquo;s 10 board members. About 10 physicians and professionals are on our expert panel. The organization started in January, but there are about 13 people who want to start a New York chapter.

The Leader World: Bright Pink has hosted a number of events around Chicago. Is that the main way you market yourselves?

Avner: It&rsquo;s been a great way to promote ourselves. We have events in Chicago, New York City, Miami and Los Angeles. It&rsquo;s always split 50-50, women and men. I think the men who are receptive; there&rsquo;s so many women who they love that are going to be affected by it. For young women, we have a whole outreach campaign to distribute information.

The Leader World: How much money have you all raised so far?

Avner: By the end of the year, we&rsquo;ll have raised \$160,000.

The Leader World: That&rsquo;s a lot for a first-year nonprofit.

Avner: We haven't done a fundraising campaign yet. It's pretty phenomenal considering we haven't even gone out there and said, 'please donate to Bright Pink.'

The Leader World: Your events have attracted some high-profile sponsors. For example, in early October, Bacardi and Vanille Royale sponsored one of your Chicago cocktail parties.

Avner: We also have Lucy activewear, a clothing line. Vanille Royale; it's a women's kind of Bacardi. They're launching this brand with Bright Pink as the partner. And the partnerships of Bright Pink are very important. Another example is Ice.com, an online jewelry retailer. That's where our young women are, so it's not always about getting a brochure at a doctor's office.

The Leader World: What are the future plans for Bright Pink?

Avner: Our vision is to really be the premier go-to organization for young women who are high-risk, just ensuring we provide the education and support. Although we don't have a cure for breast cancer yet, the fact that there are advances in medicine and technology are exciting. We're getting closer each day. I have not lost hope that one day, we'll find a cure.