

FROM HER OWN WORDS...

For this premiere interview, we have the pleasure to introduce you to the founder of the Pink Chair Project RVA, Linda T. Caruthers. Linda's commitment to helping others is captured in this Zoom conversation as a Question-and-Answer interview, known as the Q&A. Many descriptions can be used to describe this multidimensional woman, from warm and friendly to energetic and proactive to robust and faithful, but we want you to know her by the heartfelt, candid answers *in her own words*.

Q: You mentioned that you do not feel like the same person you were before cancer and that you have changed. Can you tell us how you feel you have changed?

A:

As a result of being diagnosed, being treated, and cured, I have changed in many ways. Now whenever I see friends, family, or clients, I share breast cancer preventative information with them. It is important to have a 3-D mammogram diagnosis and a medical team to identify the cancer at the right time and to be at the right place. I knew Johnston Willis Hospital was the right place for me.

Wherever I go personally or professionally, I share the importance of the 3-D mammogram screening. It has surprised me the number of highly educated persons who are unaware of what the 3-D is and why they need it. It stuns me because they do not have breast cancer in their family history, that they are not aware they can get it. It astounds me that they cannot conceive it can happen to them.

If I can help one woman at one time with finding out by early detection, I know I will have done a good thing because early detection can beat cancer. Personally, I now spend less time on mundane things, like taking lists of things that needed to be done or at least, things that I thought were important to get done. The lists are no longer my priorities.

I feel like a different person. I have changed priorities because before breast cancer those mundane things that I thought were important overwhelmed me but did not bring meaning. My thoughts now have turned to God and how I can help others with breast cancer. If the living room isn't vacuumed, it does not matter as much as God, family, work, and my conviction of my need to help others. A vacuumed carpet will not answer the question, "How do I want to spend the rest of my life?"

Q: When your physician first told you that you had breast cancer, where were you and what were your first feelings and thoughts?

A:

The moment when I heard I heard the diagnosis of breast cancer spoken out loud, I was stunned. I felt a wave, almost like a chill, and I remember thinking, “What’s going to happen to me? How do I want to spend the rest of my life?”

The moment I heard the nurse navigator mention the healing tools I would need for my recovery after surgery-- the recliner, the pillows, and tubes-- my insurance mind kicked in. It seemed that all the years of training I had helped me to wonder, “Who pays for all these things that are listed? I am older, I am in a better position. I can buy these things. However, what about women who are in a different position who are not self-employed like I am?”

I remember adding figures quickly in my head and came up with the starting sum of \$2500 which is a significant amount when nothing has been done yet for the patient.

“Who pays for this?” is the whirling question I kept asking myself. I spent that day sitting in offices—the office when my diagnosis was announced and the waiting room. I remember the chairs and seeing women of all ages but surmised each had her own diagnosis and need for healing. I realized in the waiting room the common denominator: we are all different, but we are all on the same journey for healing. This realization stunned me. While in the waiting room, I had the desire to give back because I was very fortunate to be diagnosed early and be able to afford some things for my healing and comfort. While sitting in the chairs with the other patients, I remember thinking, “Not everyone can afford this. I have to give back.”

Q: Can you tell us how this seed of an idea of the Pink Chair Project RVA came to you and what you imagined it would be?

A:

The idea came immediately. Here I was, sitting in the chair, hearing the diagnosis and I thought, “So every woman who has received a diagnosis has sat in this chair.”

I remember turning to Dr. Ruth Felson and asked her, “What is the age of the youngest woman you had to treat, and she said, 17.” I am 73 so the next question I asked was for me alone, “How does a woman of any age or circumstance manage to get what she needs, whether a college student or mother of three does not matter—and of course, I was thinking about COVID thrown into the mix and the loneliness and alienation of lockdowns while hearing a diagnosis. Then I thought about the chair. It was natural that I would since I had sat in chairs all day at the doctors’ offices.

After surgery, I sat in the remote-controlled recliner I had borrowed from my daughter with my laptop and a comfortable cover provided by my other daughter. I Googled everything I could about medical recliners, and up popped the Pink Chair website from Connecticut. I looked for a similar one here in Richmond, and finding none, my immediate thought was, “This is it. This is what we need.” That was the seed of the idea for the Pink Chair Project RVA.

The more my committee and I talked the project through, we realized the recliner we wanted to provide was more than answering a physical need for breast cancer patients; the recliner would be as a healing chair for those housebound, confined for weeks and perhaps, even more for recovery, and would need a special place to be-- their own sanctuary for healing.

Q: What was your experience with the recliner as your healing chair?

A:

It was a place to escape. It was comfortable enough to accommodate me with my loose clothing, drainage tubes and a blanket hugging me. The healing chair helped my healing, emotionally and physically. I felt a strong spiritual connection, too. Being in the chair and knowing I was loved felt almost as if God was hugging me and as if He said, "You will be fine." I felt comforted in the comfort of the recliner.

Q: How did you motivate others to join you on this journey to create Pink Chair RVA?

A:

I firmly believe that God has been preparing me for the Pink Chair for many years. Anyone who is in private business knows the importance of networking. For 23 years I have worked with a variety of home care agencies and have developed relationships with colleagues and clients. We all support one another personally and professionally.

When shared with colleagues about my diagnosis and recovery, I had to explain what was happening with me and how my life has been redirected to the Pink Chair Project RVA. The outpouring was amazing. Everyone said to me, "Let me know what I can do."

I called a few of my friends, and again, I was astounded at their enthusiastic response. God put these persons in my life years ago and I have been prepared and groomed. God is using me for this purpose, and I want Him to use me and others.

John B. Clair made the project click. I simply asked him, "How does one set up a nonprofit?" There he was president of the board of directors for The Hawthorne Cancer Foundation. Our conversation planted a mutual vision, and from then on, the Pink Chair Project RVA became a part of this Foundation with the help of Steven E. Thornton, executive director. I am just as stunned as everyone else how everything has fallen into place as if everything was meant to be.

Q: What do you expect to be advantages working with The Hawthorne Cancer Foundation and the Sara Cannon Cancer Institute that will help breast cancer patients?

A:

Fortunately, we are part of the Foundation. We can help patients with resources to connect with professionals who can answer questions in the healing journey. As well as the recliner that the patient can borrow for recovery at home, we will offer a quilt, drainage tube holders, and pillows from a sewing guild, and a gift bag with resources such as information about support groups and an inspirational message to the chair grantee. As this project grows and evolves, we would like to establish the Pink Chair RVA as a known part of the oncology community in the metro Richmond area.

Q: If you could give advice to someone who has just discovered they have breast cancer, what would you say to help them on their journeys?

A:

My best advice is to embark on the breast cancer journey for healing. Whatever it is that gives you angst, put it aside. Whatever gives you strength and hope, grow it. Do not hesitate to ask for help. Someone else can handle the mundane, and you are not alone. Let it go and trust in the healing.

Q: What would you say to potential donors or anyone who wants to help make this project successful?

A:

With advancement of technology for early detection, whether male or female, you will be touched directly or indirectly by breast cancer. By donating to Pink Chair project, you will be helping possibly a personal loved one, or yourself.

I am very grateful for the support of the current volunteers and sponsors stepping forward for the Pink Chair and I am eternally grateful to God for giving me a second chance.

This is an open invitation to give and to help others.

--interview compiled by Kathryn Helen Geranios

