

You Night 2013 – a Model’s Perspective

Written by You Night Model and Breast Cancer Survivor/Overcomer Dorothy McHaney

Well, I just enjoyed the experience of a life time!

I was invited along with 23 other ladies who have overcome breast cancer to participate in the first annual fundraiser style show for the Mary Byrd Perkins Cancer Center in Covington, LA. Yes, the FIRST annual...and the organizers were "flying without an airplane". The plan was for us to be models and the plans were big. They didn't plan for us just to walk down the runway like the amateurs we were, oh no!

We began with an Orientation on September 14 and my immediate thoughts were, "Oh my God, what have I gotten myself into?" There were many steps to accomplish and appointments to set. Boutiques volunteered to do our hair and makeup, provide the clothing, apply eyelashes, etc. We were gifted with bras, decorative bra straps and measured thoroughly that night.

What most impressed me was the opportunity to meet every Wednesday night with Celeste Hart of Creating U. Celeste went above and beyond the call of duty in teaching us how to carry ourselves, walk a runway, pose for pictures etc. The two hours she initially agreed to almost always stretched to three.

On September 24, Celeste had the opportunity to observe her raw material and I'm sure she wondered how she was going to accomplish this feat. Jimmy asked me what the ladies were like and I said, "Well, go into Wal-Mart on a busy Saturday and get on their speaker. Request that any ladies who have overcome breast cancer come to the front of the store and choose the first 23. That is what we are like. We are all sizes, ages, and stand from 5 foot to over 6 foot tall. Some have little self-confidence and others seem over-confident. The age range is from 23 to 73. Many are still getting chemo and others are putting off surgery until after our show. Melanie, our youngest, didn't have enough length on her hair and chose to wear a beautiful, long wig."

This is what made our event so amazing. It was everyday life, every day real people, not a group of model-like ladies assembled to appear like "Here's Hollywood." No! As we met week after week with Celeste giving her all, we began to spring forth like a well of living water. We had a runway for our practice and at first many of us clowned around to mask our discomfort but gradually our confidence grew.

I noticed that Celeste began to relax a little. She quickly realized that since most of us were much older than the young people she normally worked with and had recently been through so much, that each of us needed to perform according to our own personalities. She taught us the basics and began saying, "Do what you feel comfortable with." Except the one unbreakable rule: no one could get away with chewing gum!

I devoted 30 minutes every day, to practicing the runway walk and the turns. There were other ladies that also scheduled practice time. We soon began to see a little smile at the corners on Celeste's mouth.

I would encourage the parents or even the grandparents to enroll children into some of these classes in order to build the confidence necessary for everyday life. I completed a modeling course when I was around 18 years-old which made a huge impact throughout my personal life as well as in the business world.

Even though I had taken the modeling course many years ago, (many, many years ago), there was so much I learned during this time with Celeste. I'm not sure if I had forgotten, or if things

have become more refined in the last 50 years. I'm saying, 50 years very softly. (Gosh, I cannot believe it.) What is awesome, is that I'm happier and more vibrant now, than I was fifty years ago. With age you learn how to live. Well, let's just say, that I'm thankful for the update by Celeste and will continue to use the new skills she taught us. It was much more than just learning the modeling skills, these were tools to enhance everyday life.

After six weeks of extensive training, we met together on October 16 at the event facility which was huge. Over 450 people were expected at our sold out event and there was standing room only. Now, the real runway was before us. They explained the choreography to us: we will be making three appearances on that runway. First we were to go out in pairs wearing formal wear, then we each appear separately wearing more casual wear. Our final walk will be in blue jeans and a black long sleeve tight tee shirt, which was furnished and given to us by Lisa McKenzie, owner of Ooh La Bra. Lisa also gave us gorgeous decorative bra straps that we wore exposed as an accessory.

Elaine Roark and I were scheduled first. Elaine is the mom of Lisa McKenzie, the organizer of our fundraiser. I cannot give enough praise to Lisa's organizational abilities. Talk about a lady that pays attention to the tiniest details!

Throughout this time, Jimmy is just trying to stay out of the way. My cousin Valda and her daughter Valerie are driving in from from Texas. Of course Jimmy will be at the event, along with my 88 year-old Mom. I better stop naming the people that will be there supporting me and the cause, as I might leave a precious one out.

Our big date finally arrived on October 17. The night had come. Probably the 23 of us together had lost over 100 pounds in anticipation of this event. Tomorrow we will eat! We were to be at the Fleur de Lis Event Center at 4:30 pm. If all goes according to schedule we were to make our first runway appearance around 7:20. We're there early to organize our clothes, shoes, and accessories. That took all of five minutes. Then, for the first time, we really had time to just visit. During the previous weeks, we had snippets of time to get to know one another but Celeste had kept us moving. Now, however, we were upstairs away from everything. All the work had been done. We were sent food and Champagne. We nibbled a little on the food, but emptied those Champagne bottles.

Suddenly we began hearing sounds from downstairs and began peaking through the big glass windows at the audience below. All of us were trying to locate the face of someone we knew. After my third trip to that window, I saw four hands waving furiously. They belonged to my tennis playing buddy and owner of the boutique that provided my hair style, Lois Eiermann, and my sweet locker room friend, Karen. Lois' shop sponsored me and went over their goal. Karen is just one of those people you meet and connect with immediately as a kindred spirit. I happily waved back to them. Contented, I returned to my new friends. I paused at the beauty I saw. The beautiful formal wear in all the colors of the rainbow...gold and silver glistening everywhere. I've never seen so many beautiful gowns and beautiful people assembled in one place. There was so much excitement in the air as we were smiling, laughing, talking, etc. Ladies which I thought Celeste would never be able to sever from their faded, baggy jeans were sitting so elegantly. Oh, at that moment, I loved them so much that I wanted to hold onto them for the rest of my life. This was our victory party. Not just over cancer, but over so many embedded fears we had started out with.

As we were all talking and sharing stories, in walked Jennifer Pearse, the owner of Southern Bridal, who had furnished all these lovely gowns we were wearing. Jennifer had spent much time with each of us. On one side of her was Lisa McKenzie and on her other side was Celeste. The

three of them just stood there beholding the beauty of the moment. They looked upon us as if they were proud parents. For a few seconds we stood silent and then the hugs started. These ladies had wanted to provide something special for us and at that moment, they realized they had been successful.

Finally, with the champagne bottles empty, the anticipated time had arrived. With everyone quiet, we made our way down the back staircase. At the bottom, we turned to the spot where we would make our entrance and saw the group of infusion nurses that had taken care of us throughout our chemo. They were going to appear onstage right before us to perform a dance skit named appropriately "Infusion". The smiles between both groups and the blinking back of tears affected all of us. These nurses had been so connected to us through the darkest days of our lives.

As Elaine and I sided up to each other, I admired how beautiful she was. Her tea length dress was the most beautiful color and perfect with her platinum hair. She's had a rough day. Being Lisa's mother, she was heavily involved in assisting Lisa with last minute chores while all I did was take care of myself. I pulled Elaine to me and as we looked into each other's eyes we both knew everything was going to be okay. Our moment had come.

She moved beautifully toward the stage with me one step behind her. Oh, at that moment the crowd went wild, applauding, yelling and whistling. We had entered a love chamber. Each model was given ten tickets for family and friends, so there were 230 people in the audience that had walked through cancer with one of us ladies. They identified with each of us. As relaxation swept over us, we did our turns and paused, looking once again into each other eyes. As Elaine made her way to the left of the runway, I moved toward the right. As we got to the end, she stopped and with an outstretched arm, (in a Vanna White pose) presented me, I did my turns and then swept my arm out to present her. We then passed each other at the front of the runway, exchanging smiles as well as places, together this time, we did our turns. As we made our way back, we walked with a little swagger as Celeste had taught us. All this love surrounding us gave us boldness! We then stopped and with our backs to each other and shoulders touching, we took in the sea of smiling faces. The audience watched us make one last turn taking each other's hand as we exited the stage. What they didn't see was our high five and saying "We nailed it", as soon as we're out of view.

Sadly, we could not see the other models as we were behind the scenes and had to return upstairs to change into our next outfits. Soon, however, the other ladies returned to the dressing area smiling from ear to ear. They also had felt the chamber of love and realized as we did that everyone was there to love and support us. This is a very rare situation and we realized the importance of soaking up this moment. No style show whether in New York City or Paris could ever top this one.

My next appearance was in a cute little short black dress with gold and silver studs. Yep, you are right, a cute little short black dress, on a 69 year-old! As my family has said many times, "Only Dorothy would do that!" I sort of warned Mom about the short dress and she wondered "if I could wear some leggings under it?" Well no! She would have really been aghast if she knew how I avoid having panty lines.

There was a little break before our third appearance so I was able to hear all the stories as the ladies returned. Lori, immediately shared that as she took her vest off to throw over her shoulder, "she dropped it!" We were all laughing as she reminisced about how she just squatted down and "properly" picked it up, threw it across her shoulder and continued walking and smiling.

As our last walk was about to take place, I'm wearing tight jeans with rhinestones on the pocket along with the black long sleeve tee. One side is off my shoulder to feature the rhinestone bra strap, and I'm strutting in five inch silver spike heels. Although my outfit is sparkling, a sadness is sweeping in as these moments are ending. The sadness dissipates quickly with the unbelievable beat of the music. I felt the rhythm of that beat working in my hips and totally milked the moments as I stepped on the stage. I just had fun!

We then dressed in whatever we wanted to wear the rest of the evening and waltzed down a spiral staircase to the sound of heavy applause below.

Then, I saw Jimmy about twenty feet away and our eyes locked as we moved toward each other. His face said it all. He was so proud and looked as if he were about to burst. We finally made it to each other and embraced like never before. We had been through so much and this was a celebration for both of us. All of the other ladies received the same love and admiration as they met up with their families. Jimmy and I found the rest of my entourage. I'd never had an entourage before!

I had an Infusion scheduled for the next day. I walked through the door to wonderful greetings and compliments. I saw Ginger and Lisa first as my vital signs were charted, and being with them is always a pleasure. They were so pumped up over the night before, recalling how great their former patients looked. As we went into the Infusion room, there was so much joy. I realized it had meant as much to the staff as it had to us. I was sitting near the main desk and watched as the nurses who had been at the show shared pictures with those who weren't able to attend. For the entire three hours I was there, the laughter, comments, and praise continued. They spoke of Amy that first came to Infusion center with long, curly red hair which was still red, curly, but short. As I listened, I realized how much we patients were embedded in their hearts. Witnessing us so very alive had given them a powerful boost. Typically we finish our chemo, go home, grow our hair back and go on with a normal life, but these nurses don't get to see that. Then I had the opportunity to share some thrilling news with them... "Laura is pregnant". I had no idea they loved us so much.

I want to end this by saying to Lisa: With all of your hard work, this is a bonus I'm sure you didn't expect. Not only us ladies, but the staff of Mary Byrd Perkins has been so blessed and uplifted by your efforts. Thank you Lisa!

Dorothy McHaney