



# Imerman Angels

BY DIANA PRICE



Laura Alexander with her daughter, Morgan.

**Laura Alexander** was a 35-year-old single mom considering a career change when she went in for a baseline mammogram and emerged with a Stage III, triple-negative breast cancer diagnosis. “I was healthy and had no symptoms,” Laura says. “Because I was making a career change, my mother suggested that I go in for a mammogram while I still had insurance.” But Laura’s doctors initially told her the screening test wasn’t warranted: “Mostly the message was, ‘You have no cancer in your family and you’re under 40, so you don’t need one.’” Luckily, Laura’s mom was more insistent, and Laura made an appointment.

But what Laura thought would be a quick, no-hassle appointment turned into something quite different. “Having never had a mammogram before, I didn’t know that you’re not supposed to spend the whole day there,” Laura says. That day would ultimately include a mammogram, an ultrasound, and a biopsy. But it wasn’t until the following day, when her gynecologist came to see her at work, that Laura knew she was in for bad news. “My OB came to my office herself when she was told my results,” Laura says. “I absolutely could not process what she was telling me, which was ‘You have cancer.’”

From that seemingly incomprehensible point, Laura moved forward to undergo chemotherapy, a lumpectomy, and eight weeks of radiation therapy. “I lost all my hair,” Laura says, “and for me the biggest obstacle—and the biggest lesson—was confronting the physical changes of cancer.” The issue was magnified by the fact that Laura worked in the entertainment industry, surrounded by actors and models. Feeling vulnerable and alone, she struggled

with the physical and emotional challenges she faced. Though she felt supported by friends and family, she didn’t feel that anyone truly related to her concerns over the impact of her diagnosis on the issues she faced—like raising her daughter by herself, dating, and her career.

“I felt very isolated,” Laura says. “I was scared. I didn’t know what this meant. Was I going to see my daughter grow up? I didn’t know anyone with cancer—let alone someone my age. It was a really frightening time.”

It was just as she finished treatment that Laura ran into a guy wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with angel wings. “He must have suspected I was a survivor from my lack of hair or my overall appearance,” Laura says. The two started talking and quickly became friends. Through their meeting Laura learned about the significance of the angelic T-shirt—it represented Imerman Angels, a nonprofit organization committed to pairing up cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers with others who have been through similar experiences. From the beginning Laura knew this was an organization she wanted to learn more about. What she learned inspired her to become an angel herself.

Imerman Angels was founded in 2003 by testicular cancer survivor Jonny Imerman, who was inspired to create the organization after feeling isolated during his own cancer journey. He knew that other patients—or “cancer fighters”—and their loved ones must also have a need for connection and mentoring. The result of Jonny’s efforts can now be seen in a database of more than 2,000 cancer fighters,

Imerman Angels was founded in 2003 by testicular cancer survivor Jonny Imerman, who was inspired to create the organization after feeling isolated during his own cancer journey. He knew that other patients—or “cancer fighters”—and their loved ones must also have a need for connection and mentoring.



Imerman Angels Survivor Day Celebration 2008: from left, Ryan McLeary, Jonny Imerman, Iris Goodman (Laura’s mom), Laura Alexander, and Morgan Alexander (front).

survivors, and caregivers. The organization makes between eight and 12 matches per day, providing one-on-one support for anyone affected by a cancer diagnosis.

Imerman Angels is committed to making connections that are as specific as possible. When prospective mentors approach the organization, they are screened and questioned extensively about the details of their diagnosis, lifestyle, and personality traits. This way, when a cancer fighter, survivor, or caregiver calls for a connection, he or she can be matched with someone whose experience is as similar as possible.

Laura says that in her case, as a young, single mother and a triple-negative breast cancer patient, the opportunity to talk with someone who was managing some of those same issues would have been invaluable. “I was surrounded by friends who had never really known a sick person—let alone anyone with cancer—and they didn’t know what to say to me.” Now, as an angel, Laura is able to offer her experience, and the hopeful story of her survivorship, to young women who feel similarly alone. But, she says, the benefit is not solely to the person seeking support. “When you become an angel and start helping other people is when you truly start helping yourself.”

In fact, Laura became so engaged in her volunteer work with Imerman Angels that when a job opportunity arose within the organization in 2008, she jumped at the chance to transform her passion into a career. As director of events and public relations, Laura works daily to ensure the success of the organization that has transformed her own life and the lives of so many others. Recently, she has re-

alized anew the value of the services offered: when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer last year, Laura experienced firsthand how important the support of fellow caregivers can be.

“I didn’t know how to be a caregiver to my mom. She went through breast cancer very differently than me, and I felt helpless on many issues. I personally think being a caregiver is sometimes harder than being a survivor.” For that reason, Laura says, Imerman Angels is determined to offer support to caregivers as well. Whether by connecting them with another caregiver, or linking them with a survivor who can tell them what their loved one is really going through, the idea is to ease the burden and normalize the experience. “We want caregivers to know we’re focused on them too,” Laura says.

The services provided by Imerman Angels are free and available to anyone touched by any type of cancer, at any cancer stage, at any age, anywhere in the world. With a growing national presence in the cancer community and a steadily growing database, the organization is set to deliver support and inspiration to many more cancer fighters and their loved ones. “We want anyone diagnosed with cancer to be matched with an angel within 24 hours,” Laura says, “because the reality is that nobody knows what to say, and you sometimes need someone by your side who is not only a realist but just gets it.” ✿

For more information about Imerman Angels, call (877) 274-5529 or visit [www.imermanangels.org](http://www.imermanangels.org).