

## Husband's pink ribbon tattoo is lasting 'scar' of love and support for breast cancer survivor



*Patrick and Dawn Meade with their twin sons, Sean, center, and Brian. Eight years after her cancer diagnosis, Dawn is living life a little differently having been buoyed by love through her battle.*

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*Staten Island Advance/Kathryn Carse*

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### **Staten Island Survivors**

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — Eight years after her breast cancer surgery, Dawn Meade's scars are still fresh. Not as a jagged, painful remnant but as a positive reminder of the love and support she received to survive it.

Feeling scarred for life after breast cancer treatment is not unusual. Damage to the nurturing and sensual part of a woman impacts her image of herself to varying degrees.

"It attacks your femininity, your breasts, your hair; anything that makes you feel girly and feminine," says the 46-year-old, sitting at the dining room table of her tidy West Brighton home.

Her twin sons are doing their seventh-grade homework downstairs and her husband, Patrick, supervises Roxie, the only other female in the family, an aggressively friendly 2-year-old Yorkie mix.

The "invasion" was not something anyone else would understand — or so she thought.

Dawn had a lumpectomy and axillary lymph nodes removed at Memorial Sloan Kettering in Manhattan on Dec. 14, 2006. Four days after her surgery was her seventh wedding anniversary. She would have been content to have it pass unobserved, but her husband said he had a special gift for her. She prepared a brave, happy face. She didn't need it.

Dawn was at her mother's to avoid catching one of her son's stomach virus. Her husband arrived excited about his present. He removed his shirt, exposing a bandage on his chest. Underneath was a pink ribbon tattoo on the same spot as her incision.

"If you are scarred, then I will be scarred with you," he told me," says Dawn.

The tears she cried were of relief at not being alone and feeling so much love. And the compassionate, unique gesture opened her up to accept the well of support and love her family and friends would share. They went through some extremely trying times in the first years of their marriage. She and her sister, Jackie Cannizzaro, were both married to firefighters. On Sept. 11, 2001, her sister's husband, Brian, was killed at the World Trade Center. Patrick spent many of the following days at the site. Dawn was going through a very difficult pregnancy with the twins. Due the next April, they were born prematurely in January and spent considerable time in the neo-natal intensive care unit.

### **Power of the pink tattoo**

Dawn Meade avoids overwhelming people with a lot of advice, but her personal experience of "scars of love and survival" is included in a comprehensive book about breast cancer, "Surviving Cancer, Our Voices and Choices."

Recently published, it provides information on every aspect of the disease — finding a medical team, treatment options, side effects, counseling and expenses.

Artist Marion Behr, who compiled and illustrated it, met Dawn when they were both undergoing treatment at Sloan Kettering, and she wanted to include the story of the pink tattoo and how important giving and receiving loving support is in survival.

Life seemed like it was settling down in 2006 when they were four and starting pre-K. That's when she got the diagnosis.

Without a family history, and relatively young at 38, it seemed to come out of nowhere. She just wanted to get it out and think about nothing but living.

The lumpectomy, an excise of the tumor and some breast tissue, and some lymph node removal was much less invasive than a mastectomy. Though it may sound silly, it was losing her hair, she says, that most upset her. She was working so hard not to seem sick, but there was the undeniable evidence.

"I thought our marriage had gone through a lot, but the cancer strengthened it," she said.

Patrick went to every doctor's appointment, taking notes, asking questions. He and her sister went to the four months of chemo treatments, providing some comic relief. They were the mainstays in a whole network of support that gave her "an overwhelming feeling of being loved."

After every chemo treatment she came home to flowers and meals prepared by family and friends. The guys at Engine 279 ladder 131 in Red Hook, her husband's firehouse, took turns bringing her to 35 radiation treatments, so dad could stay home with the kids. Gifts flowed in, flowers, pajamas, skin care products.

But it wasn't just the big efforts or the pampering. The smallest thing meant so much — a text, an e-mail, a card — that let her know she was being thought of and prayed for. "It means more than you can ever imagine.

People shouldn't fear they won't say the right thing. Not sending that card or text is more hurtful than saying the wrong thing," she says.

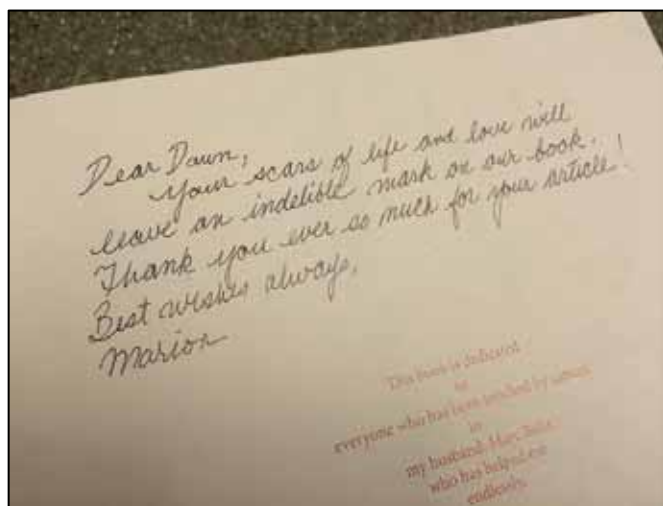
Although, "Don't Google" is one thing she advises, her most valuable role she has learned is being able to "let them know, they will feel normalcy. No one tells you you will be OK."

Once she said, she would have been the person "spewing advice." But now she knows the value of listening. "I never preach or tell them what I think they should do. I just offer a supportive ear and tell them what worked for me," she says.

Focusing on the positive and avoiding negativity is something she brings to work with the Department of Education. A speech pathologist with the students at PS 44 in Mariners Harbor, their progress and the gratitude they express for the smallest kindness is what sustains her.

Traveling is something she and her husband love and are doing more of, and their wedding anniversary is still a special day. But, though she supports breast cancer research, she has only been to the Making Strides walk once, and there is an anniversary she does not observe — the one that marks the years of being cancer free.

"I celebrate everyday I'm living. I just want to move forward and live," she says. Something she does a little differently having been buoyed by love through her battle.



West Brighton resident Dawn Meade contributed to "Surviving Cancer: Our Voices & Choices," a collaboration compiled and illustrated by Marion Behr, that provides information about nearly every aspect of dealing with the disease from physicians, patients, researchers and health professionals.