

Bernie Nolan: 'I don't think about dying – f*** that!'

By Ruth Huntman.

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Singer and actress Bernie Nolan on battling breast cancer in her own inimitable way...



Breast Cancer Pin, £12, breastcancercare.org.uk; dress, £75, Warehouse

If Bernie Nolan's cancer were an opponent in a boxing match, she'd KO it with the sheer force of her personality and sick sense of humour. Breezing into the tiny pink London cafe for our shoot – in a bright purple coat, jeans and boots – she throws off her bandana, marvels over the giant cake we've brought to celebrate her 50th birthday (today, 17th October) and states, 'How do you want me – bald, right?'

When our stylist pins a breast cancer ribbon brooch on her jacket she jokes, 'Go easy there love, I know I'm having that breast removed soon, but not yet.' And when she rejects our offer of tights, she explains, 'I'll go bare-legged. I haven't got a hair on my body after chemo, there are some advantages – no waxing required!'

Her attitude might be a shock to some people for whom the very mention of 'the C word' spells

an instant death sentence. But that's the point, because she's proof that just ain't so. Despite having got up at 6am for the journey from her Surrey home, and looking pale (the make-up artist soon gave her a bit of a glow), she's got more energy than the rest of us put together.

The only sign she's ill is when she struggles getting into a pair of heels, explaining one of the side effects of the chemo has been numbing in her toes. And the only time the joking stops is when she takes a call telling her that her sister Coleen is in terrible pain after surgery to repair fingers crushed in her recent accident. 'Sorry about that,' she says, wiping away a tear, 'but she's my baby sister, I hate her being in pain.'

What a woman. With chemo over, she's now preparing for a mastectomy later this month. On a mission to show other women fighting the disease they don't have to be scared, she tells her story, as only she can...

BERNIE'S STORY...

Just before I did Popstar To Operastar I noticed there was this dimpling under my left breast. It looked a bit weird, but I thought nothing of it, which was wrong.

When the show started, I was in such heaven I put it to the back of my mind. I couldn't feel a lump, so I dismissed it as an age thing. Then my nipple became inverted and I knew there was something wrong. As soon as the show finished, I went straight to the doctor, who found two small lumps, and a week later I was at the screening centre with my husband Steve, having a mammogram.



With hubby Steve

I thought they'd tell me I could leave straight afterwards, but they made me wait and then the nurse called me back in and said, "We're not happy with the mammogram." They wanted to do more tests, including a biopsy then and there. I felt totally sick.

After the biopsy, I was called into a room and she dropped the bombshell: "Do you want to get your husband or tell him yourself? Because we think it's breast cancer." I wanted her to tell him because she had all the facts and poor Steve went as white as a sheet – his mother died of breast cancer three years ago. We went to the car and neither of us cried that day, but the next morning in bed, he just sobbed and sobbed in my arms.

I didn't cry until a week later when I got the final tests back. I've got an aggressive breast cancer and it had already gone to some lymph nodes, but luckily it hadn't spread anywhere else. That was a terrible time, wondering how far it had spread. I just lost it in the car on my own. Then I calmed down because I thought, "I have to face my daughter Erin." She's only 12.



With her daughter Erin

Bless her, her first question was, "Are you going to die?" and I said, "Absolutely not, no way". Then she asked, "Is it big?" and I said, "No, they've got it early". Then she just said, "Right, I don't want to talk about it any more" and one little tear trickled down her cheek.

I'm only human and I admit at the beginning there was a thought of, "Why me?" But minutes later I thought, "Why not me, who the f**k am I? Why anybody?" How could I be so arrogant?

But everything was sooooo great up until then. I was signed up for a major TV drama and I was going on tour in Calendar Girls. But I had to pull out.



Top, £55, Warehouse; jeans, £35, Butterfly by Matthew Williams at Debenhams; shoes, £22.99, New Look; blazer, £99, Phase Eight; Breast Cancer Pin, as before

Chemo started in April at the Royal Surrey Hospital. I was so chuffed when they put me on a trial for the new drug Pertuzumab. But during the first session, I had a terrible allergic reaction to another drug and thought I was a goner. I felt like my head was going to explode and I couldn't breathe. Luckily, the nurse switched it off straight away, then suddenly doctors and nurses were running around with oxygen and giving me injections. That was a bit scary.

But there was a funny side. I had to pull the mask off and say to the nurse, "I'm feeling a bit funny in the downstairs department." She told me that was normal, but I said it again. Steve went, "OK love, we get the message." Ha ha, they're lucky I didn't say something else.

I had to come off the trial and I was pissed off with myself, my body had let me down. But two weeks later I went back for tests and the lump had shrunk. Now it's a fifth of its size.

I've been really lucky with the chemo. I've only been sick once, and not that ill with it – apart from 25 mouth ulcers, which were unbearably painful. I couldn't eat or sleep. I was a bit cocky about losing my hair at the beginning. But when I just had little tufts left I really looked sick, like an alien. One day I thought, "I'm sick and I'm in charge, not cancer". So I shaved it off. Steve calls me Uncle Fester!

Some days I'm like, "Shall I wear a wig, or a bandana?" because I'm worried about how others will react. Some people just don't handle it well. It's been a shock that I haven't heard from some friends since I was diagnosed. Then there's some who have contacted me recently and said, "I'm so sorry, but I didn't know what to say." But I understand it's difficult.



Bernie (front right) with the Nolan Sisters

Telling my sisters was hard, especially because Anne and Linda have both had breast cancer. Coleen took it the worst. I think it makes you aware of your own mortality a bit, especially when you've got kids. Bless her, she couldn't phone me for about a week. And she was like, "I'm sorry, but I knew that I would cry and didn't want to upset you".

For me, waiting to hear if I was a carrier was worse than being told I had the disease. When I got the brilliant news that I'm not, I cried. I was so relieved because Erin could have been at big risk.

I'm having a single mastectomy this month. It's a three-and-a-half-hour operation and they are doing the reconstruction at the same time and I get to keep my own nipple. Fantastic isn't it? I'm really excited because I know that when I wake up after the op, it's over. Having a breast removed doesn't worry me at all, it's just a piece of skin. I'm lucky because I've got Steve – he's not bothered about it. He loves me.

Some people might be a bit uncomfortable with how frank I am. I'm not trying to be inspirational or an ambassador, I'm just gobby about everything, that's me. I was on The Alan Titchmarsh Show the other week and I joked, "You can't confuse me, I've got breast cancer". Some people might have been shocked. But that's the way I cope. I've hardly had any negative moments because I won't allow it, and I've never thought about death. I'm not dying. F**k off to that.

It sounds weird, but in a lot of ways it's been a great year. I've seen much more of Steve and Erin, and we're going to have a big family Christmas at mine with my sisters. I hate it when people say I'm an inspiration because it's the thousands of wonderful emails and letters that have inspired me. There was one particular email that came when we were a bit down. This woman had had the same cancer as me 10 years ago and said, "You can get over it. It's one

year of your life and it will go by really quickly.” That made a huge difference.

I've postponed my 50th birthday do until January, but it's going to be a massive “F**k off to cancer” party. I've always been a bit of a party animal. In the old Nolans touring days I used to stay up all night chatting and get through a bottle of vodka. So I might even dance on the tables naked... with my new left boob.

*Shot on location at Tea Party (teaparty.uk.com), call 07779 635876 for further information.
With thanks to the Cake Store (cakestore.co.uk), Primrose Bakery for the cupcakes (primrosebakery.org.uk) and Marks & Spencer for the champagne and cupcakes.*

*Fashion: Carly Stevens. Assisted by: Clemmie Fieldsend. Photography: Nicky Johnston.
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