

Bernie Nolan: My cancer has brought my sisters back to me

By Claire O'Boyle

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She's summoning up every ounce of energy for a gruelling fight against cancer but Bernie Nolan is hoping something else can be healed too...the bitter rift with her sisters.

The singing family fell out last year after the four youngest Nolan sisters reunited for a tour – without Anne and Denise.

But after a series of very public rows, it looks like their anger is starting to thaw at last, towards Bernie at least.

“Anne and Denise have started texting me,” says Bernie, 49. “Anne called me when she first heard I had cancer. We had a lovely chat but now we’re only in touch by text. We just talk about the illness and our children really.

“Me and Denise text once in a while about the cancer, too, and that’s good. It seems to be a first step towards reconciliation. It’s all still a bit guarded though because there’s a lot of water under the bridge and a lot has been said.”

Bernie, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in April, says she doesn't have the energy to patch things up between the rest of the clan.

"As regards what's going on between them and Coleen and the others, I don't know," she says. "I've got enough going on. I hate rowing and not speaking to people, it's so childish and horrible. If we could get back to being civil, that would be great. I think we will. I'll be civil with them at least, but I'm not sure about the whole lot of us."

Maureen is getting married in Spain this month and Anne and Denise have not been invited. On top of that, the other sisters will be bridesmaids.

"It is sad they're not coming," says Bernie. "Anne's 60 this year and I'm going to be 50, so this can't go on for ever. Anne fell out with all of us and I can't make my sisters feel things they don't. I wish I could. But having something like this happen to you and getting sick makes you realise what matters."

Bernie has had a mountain of support from fans since her diagnosis – but some of her so-called pals have ignored her.

"You find out who your friends are," she says. "So many haven't been in touch with me, not a text or a card. I think it's because they don't know what to say – and that is me being kind! They've disappeared. If someone you know gets sick, be a friend. It takes nothing to send a text to say, 'Thinking of you'. That would have helped so much."

Bernie, who starred in *Brookie* and *The Bill*, says she has more than enough support from her husband Steve Doneathy, 49, and daughter Erin, 11.

"I'm so glad it's me and that neither of them are sick," she says. "I'm positive. I know I can deal with it. Of course you go through the motions thinking, 'Why me?' But why not?" And she says coping with her illness has brought her and Steve, whose mum died of breast cancer, closer together.

"Sex goes out the window," she says. "But the love is great and the affection and closeness is better than ever. Something like this shows you how much you're loved. Steve doesn't care if I have two breasts or none or no hair, he just wants me to be OK."

"The first week after we found out Steve was really upset. All he could think about was death because of his mother. I understand that – but I never thought of death."

For Bernie, facing up to losing her hair was one of the most difficult challenges. "In the build-up to actually shaving my head, it was more traumatic than I thought it would be," she says.

"The day before I did it I had a little ceremony with my hairdryer. I'd been trying to blowdry the little wisps I had left across my head and I looked terrible, I felt like Bobby Charlton with his comb-over. I looked so frail and much sicker than now. I looked at my hairdryer and said, 'Right then, I won't be seeing you for a few months' and put it away."

And now she feels a million times better. "Fair enough, it's not a look I'd have chosen," she says. "But it could have been worse, I could have had a big lumpy head. And I think choosing to shave it off put me in control. I was saying, 'Right you b****d, you're not making all the decisions'.

"At the start I'd recoil looking in the mirror, but now I'm used to it. And although you'd think you'd lose all your confidence about your looks and your body and your hair, in a way you don't. You're fighting this thing, something bigger than you've ever fought before and it makes you stronger. I used to be like so many other women, defined in a way by my boobs and hair. But if there's one thing this illness shows you, it's that there's more to us than just boobs and hair."

And she has a few tips for other women in her position.

"If you think of the most gorgeous bald women, they have stunning eyes," she says. "Like Sinéad O'Connor and Gail Porter. They made the most of their best features. You have to spend more time on your face and now I'll never go anywhere without mascara, you can't lose your femininity.

"My advice to women who lose their hair is don't let yourself disappear. I've been lucky as I've still got my eyelashes, but if you lose yours, wear false lashes.

"You see women who almost want to fade away with their bald heads and not a scrap of make-up. It's like they're saying, 'Don't look at me', it's like they're ashamed. Be proud of it, you're still you."

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