



THE QUESTIONS  
SEEMED ENDLESS.

## BEYOND CANCER

Artist and breast cancer survivor Marion Behr presents a comprehensive resource for anyone touched by the disease

*“You have cancer,” I heard the doctor say. Next I felt a barrage of emotional jolts: fear for the future, dread of a disease I could not comprehend and anger because something was growing inside of me that had no right to be there. Would it destroy me? All these feelings were followed by a very basic animal instinct: I was determined to survive, but how? I didn’t know where to begin. What kind of hurry was I in? How much time would it take to find a solution? Where could I find the necessary doctors? The questions seemed endless.*

From *Surviving Cancer: Our Voices and Choices*, a collaboration compiled and edited by Marion Behr ’61, G’62

To learn more about Marion Behr’s story, turn to the Q&A on the next page »

THE BOOK IS illustrated with photos of Marion Behr’s sculptures created from radiation cradles. This one is titled *Cancel Cancer*.

## Q&A

**T**HE DAY AFTER MARION RAY BEHR '61, G'62 UNDERWENT breast cancer surgery in 2006, her husband Marc brought home sushi for the two of them and for their children and grandchildren who had come by the house to offer get-well wishes. Since Behr was recuperating, her family members gathered in her bedroom while enjoying their meal. She remembers her then 4-year-old grandson exclaiming, "Grammy, this is the best picnic I've ever been to!"—his happiness shining a healing perspective on the day. "The next morning it felt good to get back to work in the studio," writes Behr, an accomplished painter, sculptor, and printmaker whose encounter with cancer inspired her to compile the book *Surviving Cancer: Our Voices and Choices* (WWH Press, 2014). "Survival, for me, is focusing beyond the cancer and living life to its fullest, every day."

Behr sought out 70 contributors who share their experience, wisdom, and care with others touched by cancer in essays and articles. The book is illustrated with photographs of the sculptures she created out of radiation cradles. Its pages follow the path of an individual's journey with the disease—from diagnosis through treatment and recovery—interweaving the personal narratives of survivors with the insights of medical professionals and cancer organization leaders. Offering a wealth of information on such topics as research, clinical trials, and financial assistance as well as a comprehensive glossary, it also serves as a guide advocating early detection.

Behr spoke about the book with *Syracuse University Magazine* associate editor Amy Speech from her home in New Jersey.

### **What inspired the creation of the radiation cradle sculptures that were the impetus for the book?**

I was near the end of the whole process [of being treated for breast cancer] and I was having my radiation treatment. I looked up on the shelf and saw stacks of blue radiation cradles like the one I was anchored in at that moment. At other times, other individuals must have been lying in each of those cradles in similar positions to mine. I started to think about the cradles as the people who were in them—wondering what they were thinking and feeling. And then, I started seeing sculptures in my mind, imagining the plastic cradles taking on body-like forms and shapes.

When you have cancer, you often find yourself in waiting rooms with other patients—sitting in this gown, waiting for your turn. People really talk to each other then: about what they're afraid of, what they're feeling. So I listened carefully. Then I asked at the hospital



*Light Coming Through Blue*

if it was possible to take the cradles home. Once used, the cradles could not be recycled, so they were delighted to give them to me. I took them back to the studio and, between treatments, I worked on them. I reshaped the cradles to represent people

and their emotions as they fought for a healthy life. And doing that work made the treatments go far away.

I think that has been true for me my whole life—that the artwork has made so many things right.

### **How did the sculptures lead to the book?**

The cancer was discovered because my kids pushed me to get a mammogram. With busy schedules and a very full life, it's so easy to skip a year or two and not realize how much time has gone by. Thank heaven for my kids! Waiting longer might have caused a considerable problem. Early mammograms can make a difference—it certainly did for me.

Naturally, I went through all the fears and reactions a person has when they learn they have cancer. But as a result of this experience, the sculptures were born. Four exhibits came to life, aimed at encouraging women to get mammograms. During the first show, there was an





Marion Behr's sculptures, including this one, titled *Nesting*, are created from alpha radiation cradles used by patients and donated by St. Barnabas Hospital in Livingston, New Jersey, where she underwent radiation therapy. Her work on the sculptures led to four exhibitions advocating early detection and inspired the idea for the book.

elderly man who sat in front of a sculpture, and I saw that he was really contemplating it—*really, really* looking. Then he turned around and told me his whole cancer story and a good part of his life story. It was fascinating. And my thought was that it would be great to compile stories like his.

At another show, held in October 2009, many of the people who came had had cancer. And as they looked at the sculptures, conversations started—an empathic, detailed sharing. The curator and two others who worked at the gallery decided to have a panel discussion that ended up being very inspiring. That was the book's real beginning, and led to a collaborative process that took 10 hours a day for four years.

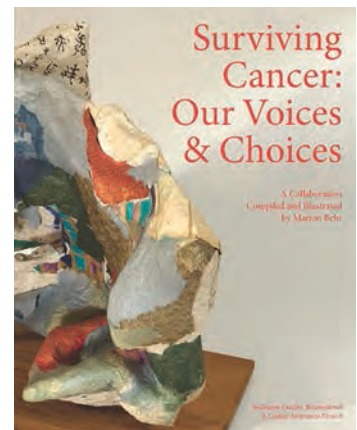
**What advice can you offer others with cancer based on your experiences?**

One thing I learned is how important it is for both the cancer patient and family members to ask questions. And it is important to have an advocate—a relative or friend—come along to your hospital and doctor visits to ask questions you might miss and to take notes on the answers. For example, my husband once questioned a technician who was taking my blood about the material of the gloves he was wearing. They were made of latex, which I am allergic to. Under the circumstances, I wouldn't have thought to ask.

I also learned not to be afraid to get second opinions or to have reports double checked. For me, doing so prevented an additional surgery under my left arm. That was a huge relief, since I am left-handed and need my left arm to create art.

**What is it about having cancer that so often ignites the sense of wanting to help others?**

It can be terrifying to hear those words, "You have cancer." But if you talk to somebody else who has had cancer—that can really make a difference. They've had rough experiences and still come through. And I think when that happens, there is a different value placed on life. You just don't know what works for a person to relieve the pain of what they've been through. With cancer, it really does seem to be, in many cases, that the answer is people helping other people. You hear about people who are terrified, and you've been there, and so you think, yes, there is a way I can really make a difference. This book is the joint effort of all its contributors to do that.



**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT** the book, visit [www.press.com](http://www.press.com).

For additional cancer resources, visit:  
[www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)  
[www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)  
[www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)  
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