

Live & Thrive After Breast Cancer

# beyond

PREMIER ISSUE

Fall/Winter 2006

**"After breast cancer,  
all the rest is noise"**

Laura Miller,  
Dallas Mayor ▶

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COVER STORY

Riding high after her election to the Dallas City Council, Laura Miller gets the news she has breast cancer. The journey that follows redefines her priorities and softens her sharp edges—and puts her behind the mayor's desk.

# Citizen

**LAURA MILLER HAS ALWAYS BEEN A FIGHTER.** The 47-year-old Dallas mayor and former investigative reporter is known for her strong personality and for facing tough challenges head-on. When she decided to leave her journalism career to pursue politics, she announced her campaign for a seat on the Dallas City Council in the weekly alternative newspaper with a cover story boldly headlined, "Mr. Mayor, Meet Your Nightmare." But just three months after winning that hotly contested seat, Miller confronted a new, much more personal battle.

In the months prior to the election in 2008, Miller had campaigned tirelessly. Canvassing routes door-to-door took priority in her life, so she postponed her annual physical exam. By the time she rescheduled her mammogram later that year, she had already found a lump high in her left breast. "Right before they told me it was malignant, I was sitting in the doctor's office with these huge files for a meeting we had," she says.



# Laura

BY PAULA FELPS

# Citizen Laura

**May 1998:**

Miller takes the oath after being elected to the city council.

**September 1998:**

Miller coaches soccer within 36 hours of her first chemo treatment.



"I was making notes ... then they came in and told me. All of a sudden, I'm looking at these papers and

wondering, "What am I doing with my life? What does any of this matter?"

When news of her diagnosis leaked to the media just days later, Miller's private battle became front-page news. But she didn't shy away from the attention. "I never thought about not being public with it," she says. "I wanted people to know I was leading as normal a life as I could, except I had to take horrible drugs and I was bald."

As a reporter, Miller had taken pride in opening the curtains that shielded issues from the public. As a cancer patient, she did the same thing. The local FOX network television

affiliate aired an ongoing series about her fight. "By my second or third chemo [treatment], I had a TV crew in there with me," she says. "I never knew what chemo was until I got cancer. I never knew what radiation was. I wanted to be very open about what I was going through so that other people would know what to expect."

Arming herself with as much information as she could get her hands on, Miller says the book *The Breast Cancer Companion*, by Kathy Lavour (Harper, 1994) became her bible. "It talked about women and their experiences, about the cancer coming back, about dying. I used to read that chapter every night, and my husband would get mad, saying, 'Why are you so morose?'"

"I'd start crying, as a parent, you're calculating—if I live another year, I get to see my daughter do this ... It's natural, because it's terribly frightening and you don't know which way it's going to go," she says.

Although she put on a brave face for the public, she says that once inside the safety of her home she allowed herself to cry and feel the fear. The mother of three found strength in the comfort of her husband, Steve Wolens, who held her hand while she fought waves of nausea after her chemo treatments and kept their life as normal as possible. Work also

## On telling daughters Alex and Lily, now 16 and 14:

My husband and I had an easel that we'd write on to talk about issues with our children over dinner. [He] had drawn a picture of a woman's figure, with the waist and the breasts, and had put a red dot where the tumor had been.

We brought our girls in, and he explained to them that Mom had had a tumor, but the doctors had cut it out and now they were going to start giving her drugs and she's going to lose her hair. He went through the whole thing, and they never said a word.

Finally at the end, he said, "Do you have any questions?" and my 8-year-old looked at me and said, "Mom, your breasts are NOT that big!"

We were so relieved! After this whole long discourse, all she could think about was, *Why did Daddy draw Mommy's breasts so big?*

kept her mind occupied. "I always tell women not to take a leave of absence if they can avoid it," she says. "It's really important to have something you're forced to do that makes you get through the day."

Miller credits exercise with helping her keep up her strength—physically and psychologically—throughout her treatment. Three years before she was diagnosed with cancer, she began working out with a trainer, and she continues with that same trainer today. She also maintained her busy schedule of working at City Hall, attending city planning sessions, budget meetings, and council meetings, and coaching a daughter's soccer team. When she was about to lose her hair to chemo, she gathered the team's 9-year-old players around her and let them each pull out a handful of hair, explaining that she was going to look different from then on. "There's a real value in being very open about your illness and showing other people what you're going through," she says. "So many other people are going through the same situation. They're curious about what happens. I wanted people to know that, yes, I have cancer, but yes, I'm still going to work."

Debbie Barnes, whose daughter was on that soccer team, has been friends with Miller since their daughters were in preschool together. Barnes says she was shocked to learn of Miller's diagnosis, but her immediate reaction was, "If anyone can survive it, Laura can." She recalls that Miller never missed a soccer game, even when cancer treatments left her mouth too swollen and raw with sores to cheer on the team. During those times, Miller told parents what the girls needed to do, and the parents did the yelling for her. "She can be an intimidating figure. This made people realize it could happen to anyone," Barnes says. "She didn't hide, and she didn't cover her head. She let people go through it with her."

Eight years later, that public approach continues to make Miller a source of information and support to newly diagnosed women. After three and a half years on the city council, she was elected mayor in 2002, a post she holds today. She continues to receive phone calls from women who believe she is someone they can turn to for help. "People still call



**January 1999:**

Miller receives her "diploma" after completing radiation treatments for breast cancer.

me and ask me what do I do, where do I get a wig, what do I tell my boss, what do I tell my children? Every woman has the same questions that I did. When you get that diagnosis, we're all the same."

A renewed appreciation for life has changed her priorities, softened some of her famously sharp edges, and instilled in her compassion for what others are experiencing. "Now I realize that there's only one thing I should worry about, and that is living," she says. "After breast cancer, all the rest is noise. You realize that everything else, including money and your job status and how many friends you have and what people think of you ... all those things are just so minor."

Each day, she marvels about the simple wonder of feeling good. "Literally, every day when I wake up

### On losing her hair:

I let a [TV] reporter do a series about my cancer, and after I lost my hair he said he wanted to shoot my head. So we did this segment where I went to my wig guy, and in the shot I took my wig off. The next day I was in the elevator with Ron Kirk, who was mayor at the time, and he looked at me and said, "What were you thinking, showing your bald head to the rest of the world?"

And I looked at Ron and said, "Hell, you show off your bald head every day. You don't have a single hair on your head!" He laughed and told me I had a good point.

# Citizen Laura

**October 2001:**

Miller speaks at the 19th annual Race for the Cure in Dallas.

**“On staying fit:** When I got cancer, I had been working out with a trainer. [And] all through my cancer, all through my chemo and my surgery, I worked out with my trainer. I lifted weights twice a week and ran three times a week. I can still feel where they cut into me, but I think the reason that I haven't had problems with it, like a lot of women do, is because I ran and lifted weights the entire time.

The weight lifting was just as much for psychological reasons as it was physical ones. It made me feel strong, it made me feel normal to be working out. My trainer was great. When I started losing my hair to chemo, he went home and shaved his head.

The one thing I would tell people is just to exercise. Not so much to ward off the cancer from coming back, but because it does so much for you. There were so many days, after I'd had treatments, where I just felt so much stronger and so much more optimistic and energetic, because I exercised. It was such a support system for me.”



*I think, isn't it amazing that I feel good today? Isn't it extraordinary that I can get up and go to work, or take a run, or take my son to go get ice cream? I remember feeling so jealous of people who could do that when I was fighting cancer.”*

Miller's husband says he has seen his wife become focused on what's most important: health, family, and happiness. “I have very strong memories of sitting in bed with her, late at night, talking and sobbing,” Wolens says. “We were so tearful and so afraid. It was like having a stranger living in our home. That stranger still lives with us; it just doesn't make as much noise or occupy the whole house these days.”

After taking tamoxifen for five years, Miller has been off the drug for nearly three years. That severs one more tie between her and cancer, but she knows that she will always live in its shadow in some ways.

“I know that it could come back tomorrow. Every time my husband has a rough day at work,

**On coming from behind:**

The worst experience I had with chemo was on a Saturday morning. My daughter had a soccer game, it was pouring rain, and I woke up thinking I was having a heart attack. I had so much acid reflux from my medications that I literally thought I was dying of a heart attack. I paged my oncologist, who knew exactly what it was and prescribed two drugs for me. I went to the drugstore, took them, then went right to the soccer game. We were playing this very macho soccer coach with an undefeated record.

He took one look at me, knowing I was deathly ill, standing there in the pouring rain in my ball cap without any hair. He kind of patted me on the head and said, "Don't worry, you don't look like you're feeling too well. We can just postpone the game." I said, "No, thank-you," and we played them. It was such a mud bowl, but we won 1-0, and we shattered his undefeated record. It was a great moment for me, because it was like one of those movies where you couldn't feel worse, couldn't be more of an underdog, and then you end up somehow winning the game.

or something critical is in the newspaper about me, we always say the same thing—these are our best days, because we're both healthy."

Recently, Miller decided not to seek reelection to her mayoral seat when the term ends next year. "I'm certain that if I'd never had breast cancer, I may have run for another term as mayor. I may have let my head—code word for ego—win out over my heart," she says. "But as I watch more people around me get diagnosed with cancer, and I look at my kids racing through their teenage years, I realize I'm running out of time.

"If you're lucky—if you have the perspective and you can afford it financially, you can make that choice to walk away," she says. "I'm awfully lucky."



**Today:**  
Cancer-free for eight years, Miller looks forward to a simpler life after her mayoral term ends next May.

