

A life interrupted



"I was a happy, active mom," says Judith with her children, Peter, Tess and Clara. "But then I was diagnosed with breast cancer."

"I'd need surgery, chemotherapy and radiation—and I was terrified. My husband, Charles, was my rock. But I needed my girlfriends, too—I invited every woman I knew over to help me gear up for battle."



Surge of friendship



"More than 80 women came to my party in January 2001—and best of all, they mobilized into an army of caregivers! Here I am, second from left, with three of my 'cavalry.'"

"Lauren, a former babysitter, signed up to deliver meals. Others enlisted to send messages of hope."



Helping each other Scrapbook

Judith's "cava

Judith Melchreit was the kind of friend who'd throw you a party just to lift your spirits, or invite a casual 500 over just to say thanks. So when Judith faced the battle of her life, it was only fitting that her friends show up for her. And boy, did they ever...

The guests would soon be arriving at her Wethersfield, Connecticut, home, and Judith Melchreit was excited.

But her husband, Charles, couldn't understand why his wife wanted to throw a party now of all times. "You start chemotherapy in a few days," he said. "I just don't get it."

But to Judith, it made perfect sense to get all of her girlfriends together for an evening of laughter, hugs and love. "I can't think of a better way to get charged up for the battle," she smiled.

Judith had no idea how right she was...

Two months earlier, 41-year-old Judith was looking forward to the holiday season with Charles and their children, Peter, 10, Tess, eight, and Clara, six.

Then a mammogram revealed a spot on her breast. There was a biopsy, and... "It's cancer," Judith's doctor told her.

Judith felt the blood drain from her face.

"What now?" she asked.

The doctor had performed a lumpectomy when she did the biopsy, but, "we didn't get all of the cancer, so I need to go back in," she told Judith. Then there'd be chemotherapy and radiation.

How will I ever tell the children? Judith's heart wrenched.

"I want them to have a happy holiday," she told Charles, delaying the news. But right after Christmas, Judith gathered her children and, swallowing hard, asked, "Does any-

one know what cancer is?"

Three pairs of innocent eyes looked up at her blankly.

"Okay," Judith nodded. "You know when you have a bad spot on an apple and you have to cut it out? Well, that's what it's like with cancer. Mommy has a bad spot and it has to come out."

This time, their eyes clouded with worry. Then they had lots of questions. "Are we going to catch it?" "What about snacks?" "Do we still get birthdays?"

Judith's eyes filled with tears of relief that her children hadn't asked the tough questions. "No, you won't get it," she smiled. "And yes, I'll be here for snacks and birthdays!"

Please, God, let it be true, she prayed.

Right before New Year's, Judith had surgery to remove diseased tissue

"I couldn't have made it without them," says Judith, center, of her cavalry captains, from left, Sue, Monica, Betsy and Jen.



Victory!

"The treatment was brutal. But with my family and friends' love, I made it through. Here I am at the May 2001 Susan Komen Race for the Cure."



"Before long, I was even strong enough to rejoin my bicycling club!"



try"

and 26 lymph nodes. A few weeks later, she'd be facing four and a half months of chemotherapy, followed by six weeks of radiation. Judith was terrified—and so was Charles. "Please, tell me how I can help you through this," he begged.

What could possibly help me prepare for this? Judith wondered.

She knew she could always count on her husband. But sometimes, she knew, she just needed a girlfriend to make her laugh, to let her cry, or just to sit with her and say nothing at all.

And that's when it hit her. "I want to invite every woman I know over," she told Charles. "I'm going to call it a party—a power surge party!"

Neighbors, other moms, church friends, the gals from her bicycling club... more than 80 women packed Judith's house! They brought multi-colored wigs and funky hats; they brought laughter and shoulders to cry on. But most of all, they brought love. The party lasted until 3 a.m.,

and as the last strains of "I Will Survive" faded, Judith was crowned as Towanda—an Amazon warrior going to battle with cancer.

When Judith crawled into bed that night, she breathed, I'm ready for anything.

But she was going to need more than one night of encouragement—and her friends knew it. In fact, four of her closest friends—Sue Bernis, Jen Merritt, Betsy Sommers and Monica Godbout—had secretly used Judith's party to mobilize an army of caregivers. Sue circulated a "calendar of cheer." "Put your name on at least one day to send Judith a card," she instructed. Jen, Betsy and Monica signed up volunteers for the

"casserole cavalry." By the end of the night, they had enough cooks to provide meals for every single day of Judith's six-month treatment!

"My friends are amazing!" Judith wept when she learned what they'd done. But to her friends, Judith was the amazing one. When Monica had first moved across the street...

"I've never met anyone so thoughtful," she'd sighed when Judith surprised them with a "Welcome to the Neighborhood" party.

And everyone in town talked about Judith's annual "Make Your Own Strawberry Shortcake" party,

which she threw just to say thanks for being a part of her life. As many as 500 invitations went out!

"Now it's time for Judith to get back a little TLC," Sue said.

And did she ever need it. Soon, Judith was weak, exhausted, nauseous and... "I'm losing my hair!" she sobbed to Charles.

He hugged her close. "You're going to go bald first, but I'll be bald longer," he whispered, making Judith laugh.

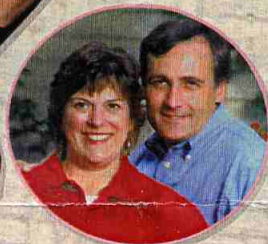
That night, Charles lovingly shaved her head, and the next day, Judith modeled her new wig for the kids. Hoping to ease the shock, she joked, "Her name is Hairy-It." It worked. They giggled.

Every afternoon, Peter, Tess and Clara would burst into their mother's room with smiles. "More cards!" they'd chirp, delivering the day's mail. Together, they'd read the notes of encouragement; then the kids would tape them on the wall. Judith called it her Wall of Blessings. And then, every evening at 4:30, she'd hear a car chugging up the driveway. The cavalry is coming! she'd breathe. She never knew who it was or what dish they were bringing, but she knew her family was being taken care of.

Thank you, she'd weep.

Sharing the strength

"And, to celebrate being cancer-free, I threw yet another party, complete with my very own 'survivor doll.' There, I thanked my wonderful friends for all they'd done for me."



"Today, we run a foundation to raise funds for the cause," says Judith, here with Charles. "I won't stop until every woman facing this monster comes out a winner!"

Then, on the day of Judith's last treatment, an entourage of girlfriends accompanied her, bringing with them pink roses and a cake.

"You know, Judith, most people just join a support group," her nurse said. "You walk around in one!"

And as soon as doctors pronounced her cancer-free, Judith planned—what else?—a party!

"You're the best friends ever!" she choked to the women who filled her home and her heart once more.

Today, Judith remains cancer-free. And with help from her four "cavalry captains," she's established The Team Towanda Foundation, an organization dedicated to fighting

breast cancer. Their biggest fundraiser is *The Charge of the Casserole Cavalry*, *The Official Towanda Cookbook*, a collection of the recipes her friends prepared during her illness as well as tips on how to cope with cancer. Available on their website, www.teamtowanda.org, they've sold more than 5,000 copies.

"I can't think of a more fitting tribute to my girlfriends," Judith says. "When I look back, it's not the cancer I remember, it's my friends. I never would have made it without them!"

—Elizabeth Holzemer

Love is always in the mood of believing in miracles.

John Cowper Powys

Has a group of neighbors or strangers made something wonderful happen in your life? Please send the details along with your name, address and phone number to: Helping Each Other, *Woman's World*, 270 Sylvan Ave., Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632. If we print your story, we'll pay you \$250. Submissions may be edited for style.