

## **Article #1**

In 2019, Roshni Katma was a young, vibrant 22-year-old who had recently graduated from college. She had moved to New York City to embark on her career and establish her independence. Nights were a blast with laughter, adventures, and embracing everything the city offered. But, sometimes, life can throw a curveball even when you are young and full of life.

It started with a lump in her left breast, a symptom she didn't think much of, figuring many young women just have lumpy breasts. She reasoned that the pain on her left side was a result of her workout routine. And the large bruise on her left arm? Just a regular bruise.

But things escalated after she got stuck in a subway door. She started noticing blood and yellowish discharge on her sheets and nightshirts. She thought the blood was due to her period. But when she noticed the discharge in her bra, she thought, "I need to get this checked out."

Her appointment with her first doctor left Roshni feeling unheard and dismissed. The doctor didn't think she needed more testing despite her worrisome symptoms. Even after receiving a sonogram and a recommendation for a needle biopsy, the doctor seemed unconcerned when the first available biopsy appointment was almost a month away. Roshni wondered if she was overreacting to her symptoms. She questioned if she should trust her doctor and ignore her own voice.

Thankfully, Roshni stood her ground, and she secured an earlier appointment for a biopsy. Trusting herself was the right way to go. The biopsy confirmed she had stage 2 triple-negative breast cancer.

Adolescents and young adults, people diagnosed between the ages of 15 and 39, can lose their sense of invincibility when diagnosed with cancer.

Roshni was no exception.

The cancer diagnosis shook Roshni's world in ways she never imagined. She struggled to understand why and thought, "I am so young. How could this possibly happen to me?" [NOTE: This could be a good pullout quote to use in a sidebar]. She didn't have a family history of breast cancer and no known genetic mutation. It took her a while to accept that a "why" wouldn't change the diagnosis or the impact of the diagnosis on her future.

At her first appointment with her cancer surgeon, she learned that the treatment could affect her fertility. At this early stage of adulthood, she hadn't even thought about whether she wanted to have children. To make matters more complicated, not only did Roshni have to think about her fertility, she was presented with an option that cost thousands of dollars.

Roshni was fortunate that her surgeon was proactive in discussing how her treatment could impact her fertility. According to [experts](#), fertility preservation consultations and procedures are low even in women who expressed a desire to have children or more children before diagnosis.

In a [study](#) designed to identify barriers to fertility preservation, 93% of the patients who desired future children at the time of diagnosis received chemotherapy; however, only 34% of these patients had a consultation with a fertility preservation specialist. The most common reasons for declining fertility consultation were cost, concerns about delaying treatment or fears of cancer recurring in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Besides providing Roshni with fertility preservation advice, her surgeon's office recognized the financial burden. And they were able to provide a glimmer of hope: Chick Mission.

Chick Mission is a non-profit organization working to ensure every young woman newly diagnosed with cancer has the option to preserve fertility through direct financial support, educational programs, and advocacy efforts. .

Roshni was skeptical about applying, having not received much financial help before. She thought, “No one’s going to help me, so why am I gonna ask?” Once again, Roshni believed she would have to figure things out alone.

The staff member thought otherwise. She told Roshni, “Give me your information, and I will do it for you. You don’t have to do anything.” By her own admission, Roshni wouldn’t have applied since she believed that she wasn’t going to receive any help.

After that, it was a blur for Roshni with the surgery, and starting chemo. A few weeks post-surgery, she inquired about paying for the egg retrieval procedure. Roshni couldn’t believe what she heard: Chick Mission had paid the entire cost!

An appreciative Roshni messaged Chick Mission on Instagram (@chickmission). Through her diagnosis and surgery, Roshni felt unseen and unsupported by the medical community, but Chick Mission saw her and provided the help she needed.

According to Roshni, “They actively want to help people...and want to change the way we deal with people with cancer.” She was grateful that Chick Mission saw her “as a whole person and not just a young person who went through cancer.”

Roshni is a vocal advocate for Chick Mission because “They realize there is a hole in the health care system in helping cancer patients. Doctors want us to get our eggs frozen before [surgery] but [don’t acknowledge] the financial barrier because of insurance [not covering the cost].”

Besides providing need-based grants to cover the cost of fertility preservation procedures, Chick Mission’s goal is 1) to raise awareness about fertility preservation and 2) to advocate for those who live in states that do not have legislation mandating insurance companies cover fertility preservation. Currently, only 16 states have legislation that ensures the cost of fertility preservation is covered for cancer patients.

Four years post-diagnosis, Roshni is looking forward to a bright future. She’s embracing her healing journey on her own terms, accepting more help, and appreciating the life she and her fiancé (and adorable pup!) have built together.

Roshni's story is a reminder that, even in the toughest times, there are rays of hope and organizations like Chick Mission making a genuine difference in people's lives.

<sup>1</sup> Sauerbrun, May-Tal, Sonali V. Pandya, Olivia Recabo, Christina Raker, and Katina Robison. "BARRIERS TO FERTILITY PRESERVATION IN REPRODUCTIVE AGE BREAST CANCER PATIENTS." *Fertility and Sterility*, 77th Scientific Congress of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, 116, no. 3, Supplement (September 1, 2021): e218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fertnstert.2021.07.592>.

## **Article #2**

Today, Marlena Murphy provides mental health therapy to people diagnosed with breast cancer at TurningPoint Breast Cancer Rehabilitation. But in 2017, Marlena's life looked very different.

Marlena's day-to-day was a bustling whirlwind. She worked as a dedicated federal background investigator. Her work days involved locating records and interviewing subjects and their acquaintances. On top of her demanding career, she was a devoted single mom who volunteered at her daughter's school. She cherished time with friends, traveling to new places, and reconnecting with nature on hiking adventures.

During her annual wellness exam when she turned 40, her doctor opted not to recommend a mammogram. The decision was based on the absence of any family history of breast cancer and the potential for false positives. This proved to be a fateful decision for Marlena.

Marlena discovered a lump in her breast while showering six months later. Although she could only feel it when she raised her left arm, she intuitively knew she needed to have it checked out. Her primary care physician confirmed the lump and suggested an ultrasound. But the earliest appointment was a month away. This left Marlena uneasy, inspiring her to push for an earlier date. Fortunately, her primary care doctor was able to secure an earlier appointment.

As Oprah Winfrey once wisely stated, "A woman's intuition is her guardian angel." And this sentiment certainly held true for Marlena. The ultrasound and subsequent needle biopsy confirmed her suspicions – she had breast cancer. The news was not surprising. But Marlena was unprepared for the complexity of the diagnosis and the difficult journey ahead.

Marlena's diagnosis was triple-negative stage-three breast cancer in her left breast. "Triple-negative" refers to the absence of receptors commonly found in breast cancers. Unfortunately, a triple-negative diagnosis limits the effectiveness of certain treatments and often requires a more aggressive treatment plan. Moreover, the cancer had already spread to nearby lymph nodes.

Throughout her treatment, Marlena leaned on her network of family and friends for support.

Marlena recollects, “I had people come from out of town. I had my family, church members, and friends. So, literally every single time I went to treatment, I was not by myself.”

It was an unsettling yet necessary lesson for her – to allow people to be there for her. Marlena says, “I’m the person that people tend to lean on. [I had to] allow people to be there for me [and] it was uncomfortable.”

Due to the intensity of her treatment, Marlena had to leave her investigator position. Yet, amidst this setback, another opportunity presented itself. Friends and family had long encouraged her to become a counselor. She had a lot of reasons at the time why she couldn’t, but her cancer diagnosis gave her the space to reconsider.

A year and a half after completing treatment, she took a leap of faith and enrolled in a three-year counseling program. She took out student loans and began driving for Uber Eats to keep some income coming in. She also began working part-time as a cancer patient advocate.

Then, four years after her initial diagnosis and two years into school, life took an unexpected turn. Both she and her physical therapist noticed unusual swelling in her left breast.

Once again, she was scheduled for a mammogram and ultrasound more than two months away. Instead of accepting the first appointment, however, she advocated for herself and secured an earlier appointment. Her intuition was right again. Cancer was detected in her left breast and under her right armpit. This time, the diagnosis was stage 4 metastatic breast cancer (MBC).

Marlena was angry and frustrated. She was only two months away from starting an unpaid internship, a requirement to graduate. She remembered how exhausting chemotherapy was the first time around. And she wasn’t sure she would be able to manage both the treatment and the internship at the same time.

Nonetheless, her determination propelled her forward. As expected, the time commitment for the treatment and the internship was significant. Marlena had to cut her UberEats driving hours and reduce her hours as a cancer patient advocate. As a result, her income was cut drastically.

With six months left until she completed school, Marlena was running out of funds.

Marlena’s financial situation, it turns out, is quite common. According to breastcancer.org, almost 48% of the women in a [2018 study](#) reported that breast cancer caused financial problems for them. And while both black and white women were included in the study, there was a significant difference between the percentage of black women (58%) vs. white women (39%) who stated that breast cancer caused them financial difficulties. The [researchers concluded](#) that a primary cause for the financial issues was lost income after receiving a breast cancer diagnosis.<sup>1</sup>

Undiscouraged, Marlena leaned into her network, and a door opened for her. A colleague from GRASP, a cancer patient advocacy group, suggested she look into Infinite Strength.

Infinite Strength was founded by breast cancer survivor Roberta Lombardi. She considered herself lucky because her cancer was caught early. And she could afford the life-saving treatment for her cancer. But she knew she was a rare patient.

During her treatment, she became aware of a painful reality. She heard other patients questioning whether they could continue treatment because they were on their own and had bills to pay. Others considered not continuing treatment to save their families from further financial struggle.

She was frustrated that women were having to choose between treatment and keeping their families housed and fed. So, she founded Infinite Strength. The organization's aim was to provide financial relief to women diagnosed with breast cancer.

But, Roberta quickly realized the process for awarding financial help was broken. It wasn't truly helping women and families. Most organizations offering financial help to cancer patients serve patients with all types of cancer. So, they frequently have many people requesting support. As a result, the amounts awarded are not enough to truly relieve the financial burden.

According to Roberta, "Giving someone \$1000 one time, that's not enough. Sure, you're helping them for one month, but then the next month they're back with the threat of eviction" or another hardship.

Realizing this, Roberta knew that to really make a difference, Infinite Strength needed to get specific. This specificity is what sets Infinite Strength apart from other organizations. Infinite Strength exclusively serves single mothers with metastatic breast cancer, and they're committed to complete financial assistance for the women they serve.

For women who qualify, Infinite Strength provides six months of assistance, up to \$1000 each month. The six-month time frame is key because it gives women the time and space to figure things out and find additional resources.

While financial assistance typically ends after six months, the emotional support continues. As Roberta says, "[The women are] always with us, [they are] always in our system. We make sure everyone that we support...knows...they can come [to us]".

A driving force for Roberta is to support and protect children after their mom receives an MBC diagnosis.

"I think these kids who have seen their moms struggle financially and health-wise, the worry that is placed on them...[is] soul-crushing," Roberta says, "If we can show them that there's a

community that cares for them and isn't gonna let them just be homeless and turn a blind eye, then to me that's what we should do." [NOTE: These might be good highlight quotes].

"I think that if kids grow up feeling that support from the community, I think it can change their future. I think it can change how they look at the world," Roberta continues.

For Marlena, the financial assistance from Infinite Strength was a lifeline. She received her first assistance amount in December. With her upcoming graduation in May, she knew she would be able to start working and have an income again. The financial help from Infinite Strength provided a bridge crucial to her completing treatment AND fulfilling her dream of becoming a mental health counselor.

"Not having to worry, not have that mental, emotional stress while trying to go through school and go through [my] internship [was very important]. [With my internship] I needed to be in a space where I [could listen to clients] and not have...to worry about how my bills are gonna be paid and make sure my roof is over my head." [NOTE: this could work as a highlight quote].

The journey Marlena embarked on, from diagnosis to survivorship, inspired her decision to become a mental health counselor. Her experience with a therapist during her treatment helped her realize she wasn't alone in the challenges she faced after her diagnosis. With the help of Infinite Strength, not only does Marlena's light shine bright in the breast cancer community, it illuminates a path to healing for the people diagnosed after her.

<sup>1</sup> "Financial Burden of Breast Cancer More Difficult for Black Women." Accessed August 7, 2023. <https://www.breastcancer.org/research-news/financial-burden-of-bc-harder-for-blacks>.