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Breast Cancer Heroines

Jill Eikenberry

Over the years, actress Jill Eikenberry has spent much energy participating in creating a dialogue about breast cancer.

In 1986, when she was first diagnosed with the disease, the code of silence that surrounded the subject during that era kept her quiet. On a speaking tour last August, the 52-year old actress told a church group in Augusta, GA how most women a decade ago didn't speak about breast cancer.

"My aunt [who had breast cancer four years before] got on her tractor, raised her eight kids and didn't tell anyone," Jill said.

Jill, who is probably best known for her role as counselor Ann Kelsey in the popular drama, LA Law, upheld the code and didn't tell cast members she had breast cancer.

"I didn't want to talk about it.," she said in an interview with [Executive Female Magazine](#). I thought there would be a tremendous stigma. I didn't want to be the 'woman with cancer' before I was the 'TV star.' So I definitely kept a low profile."

Keeping Up Appearances

Jill's career was at its peak when she was diagnosed. She had just finished shooting the pilot with husband and co-star Michael Tucker, and the couple took a five-day breather vacation in the Caribbean. The day they returned, Jill found the lump. A mammogram soon confirmed it was cancerous.

"The blood drained out of my body," she said. "I thought I was going to die. I thought it was a death sentence ... I laid on the bed and cried for a couple of days."

After having a lumpectomy and 11 nodes removed from under her right arm, the couple called LA Law's producer to cancel their involvement in the 21 episodes that had already been scheduled. But instead of letting go of the respected duo (who have now been married 25 years), the producer rearranged shooting so that Jill could get daily radiation therapy at the University of California, Los Angeles.

By day, Jill continued playing the strong, independent counselor that later won her a Golden Globe Award. By night, she began the long process of emotional and physical recovery.

"I was playing a fighter during the day, so it was hard to be a victim [through the night]," she said.

Breaking the Silence

Jill continued with the code of silence until, about two years later, she was asked to do a documentary, "Destined To Live", chronicling the emotional effects on breast-cancer survivors.

"I realized that I was ready to tell my story, that I needed to come out of denial," she recalled. "At the time, it was a big deal. Fewer people were talking about breast cancer. I had to announce that I had cancer in front of a huge gathering of executives and press."

Jill ended up co-producing and hosting the powerful documentary which "... lets people know they could survive the disease if they were alert and more in communication with their bodies." Jill and co-creator, Linda Otto also wanted women "to realize that they weren't alone and that there was a lot of hope."

Continuing The Fight

Since overcoming breast cancer and throwing off the shackles of silence, Jill has gone on to talk publicly about the disease and lead motivational seminars at the Center for Women's Leadership.

Her acting career has also thrived with appearances in several films including "My Very Best Friend", "Parallel Lives", "Chantilly Lace", "Inconvenient Woman", and "Manhattan Project".

Although Jill Eikenberry has won her particular battle, she still continues the fight. With husband Michael, who also talks publicly about dealing with breast cancer, Jill hopes that through sharing her experience, she can inspire change in the way people talk (or not) about the disease. The church group was a good indication of the change. When she asked women in the audience living with breast cancer to raise their hands, more than 10 shot up.

Obviously, the code of silence is being broken.

Thanks to the [Augusta Chronicle](#) for extra material for this story.

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