

YOU ISSUE

Cancer-free at 25: Asha has a lot to smile about...not that she's ever let herself stop.



"My reason to celebrate"

A survivor's tale

A year ago, at age 24, my world collapsed: I discovered I had breast cancer. Now it's Christmas, and—after surviving chemo, hair loss and countless laughing and crying jags—I'm ready to really celebrate...being alive.

By Asha Mevlana as told to Jennifer Braunschweiger

Last January, three months after my 24th birthday, 15 of my friends held a party for me. A haircutting party. Ever been to one of those? Our plan was to chop off the long, thick black hair I'd had my whole life. We all jammed into a friend's apartment, put on some dance music (that hopelessly irresistible kind) and I sat in a chair. Each guest took a turn with the scissors, and before you could say "Joan Jett," all but two inches of my hair was on the floor. We tied fistfuls of it with pink ribbons and gave them out as favors. When the party was over, I felt curiously free. After all, I knew that if I didn't take control, my hair would fall out on its own. That's what happens.

You see, earlier that day, I'd had my first chemotherapy treatment.

I'd found the lump a year earlier, in January 1999. It felt like a BB under my skin: hard, smaller than a pea, tucked away in my left breast, right under my armpit. I'd gotten in the habit of doing a monthly self-exam in college and had kept it up since moving to New York City after graduation.

It's not like I freaked out right away. I figured the lump was either a harmless cyst—my mom had found one once—or nothing at all. Can you blame me for shrugging it off? After all, I was only 23.

But then my mom found out. In February, while visiting my parents in Boston, I showed her the lump and she wouldn't stop bugging me about it. She kept telling me to get a mammogram. Remember Grandma, she'd say. (My grandmother was diagnosed with breast cancer about four months earlier, and then there was my aunt, who'd beaten the disease when she was in her thirties.)

I tried to ignore my mom's nagging and just go to work and watch *Will & Grace* and be *normal*, but the lump kept growing. Gradually. Irritatingly. Agonizingly. And I finally gave in. That June, I got a mammogram.

Result: inconclusive, as it is for many young women (whose breast tissue is relatively dense). I sighed with relief ("I'm okay...it's okay"), willfully tuning out the doctor's advice. Be sure, she said. Get an ultrasound.

By November, my "okay" lump was the size of a small marble. I decided to schedule the ultrasound. As I watched the doctor examine the images of my breast on the screen, I said, "It's a cyst, right?" No, she replied tonelessly, it wasn't. Then she said we'd better get a biopsy to see if it was malignant. And at that moment, staring at that flickering screen, it finally sank in: this could be breast cancer. And maybe I'm going to die. And I'm 24.

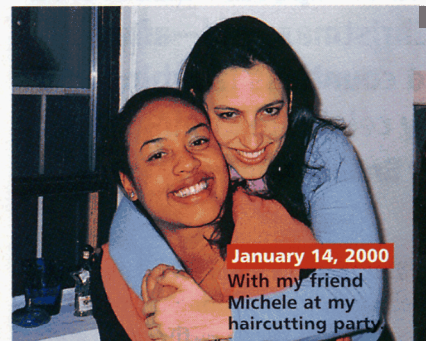
The doctor was reassuringly brisk: “You’re young—you don’t fit the profile.” On December 15, 1999, almost one year after I’d first found the lump, I had the biopsy. The doctor stuck a needle in the lump to collect sample cells. Then I waited. Ten excruciating minutes. As soon as I saw the doctor’s face, my heart started pounding. “It’s breast cancer,” she said softly. In absolute shock, I put my head in my hands and just started crying.

Christmas, while other people were shopping, I imagined dying. I spent hours trying to figure out how to say good-bye to people. But I also fantasized about trips I could take before I died. It’s hard to explain: I was so scared of dying, but somehow, it was not a purely negative thing. I just desperately needed to know if I was going to be okay or not. I needed to know.

I got lucky. My cancer hadn’t spread. That was my Christmas present, and the relief was unimaginable, a whole new

let my family and my friends understand what was happening. And, I hoped it might help other women avoid my mistakes. Joey, a friend who was in film school, also began making a documentary about me.

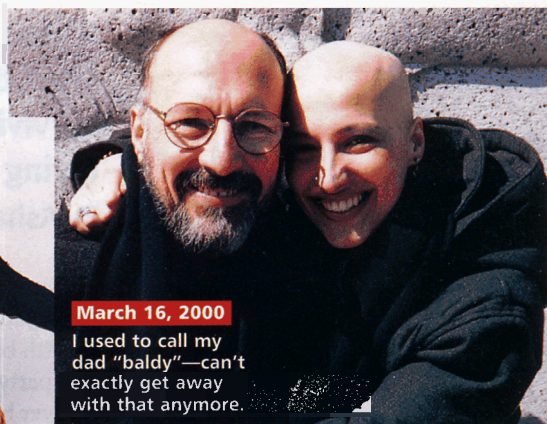
In January 2000, I had my first chemo session: five hours hooked up to an IV that pumped industrial-strength drugs into my bloodstream. I was constantly nauseous but kept



January 14, 2000
With my friend Michele at my haircutting party.



January 14, 2000
Charlie’s Angels with choppers.



March 16, 2000
I used to call my dad “baldy”—can’t exactly get away with that anymore.

I couldn’t handle telling my mom right then. I knew she’d be devastated. I used a pay phone in the hall to call my brother, Z, who lived nearby. “Z, I have breast cancer,” I somehow managed to say, gulping down each word. “Call Mom and tell her.” Before I could hang up, I completely lost it.

I scheduled the surgery to remove the lump the very next day. I’d phoned my best friend, Liz, and she drove from Boston to be with me. My parents flew in, too. When I eventually told my other friends, I was blunt: “I have breast cancer.” Each time, it got easier to say. People were speechless at first, but almost everyone offered to come be with me. So many people called that Liz and I joked that I should rerecord my answering machine message: “If you want to know what happened to Asha, press one. If you want to know about her treatment plan, press two.”

The week after my lumpectomy was the worst in my life. I waited to hear whether the cancer had spread and what my chances of survival were. All I could think was, You let this go for almost a year—of course it has spread. During the week leading up to

It finally sank in: this could be breast cancer. And maybe I’m going to die.

level of sudden, body-drenching peace I’d never known existed. But I hadn’t eradicated the disease yet, and the lumpectomy—which left a faint, two-inch scar under my armpit—was only the beginning. Because I was so young and cancerous cells grow so fast in young women, three doctors recommended fairly aggressive treatments. (One even suggested a double mastectomy, but even that wouldn’t guarantee the cancer wouldn’t return.) In the end, I decided on four intense chemotherapy sessions spread over twelve weeks, followed by seven weeks of radiation (ten minutes a day, five days a week).

As the weeks passed, I realized I had two choices: I could either get severely depressed (no way) or try somehow to get something positive out of this experience. So I decided to create a website (www.ashamevlana.com) to document what I was going through. It helped me talk about my feelings and

going to work. My boss was very understanding whenever I’d have to take off early for treatments.

My friends really got me through chemo. They came to all my treatments; we’d order in pizza and watch movies like *Tootsie* and *You’ve Got Mail* until I’d forget the IV because I was laughing so hard. We used to joke about wheeling me out on the hospital bed to pick up guys. Sometimes the nurses had to tell us to be quiet because we were cracking up so loudly.

I felt as though I needed to be strong all the time for my parents’ sake. One day my dad called me at work to see how I was doing. I said I was okay. “I know,” he said, “but I’m not.” I knew he was thinking about his baby girl dying. After that, I tried to never cry in front of them again.

In a crisis, a sense of humor can make everything so much easier to deal with. At one point, I was feeling

self-conscious about losing my hair, so my friend Brian cracked me up by saying, "You know, Asha, I never liked your hair, anyway." Nice, huh? Even dark humor worked. Not long after my second chemo appointment, when my short hair had just started to come loose, my friends and I were at a restaurant and the food was taking forever to come. Finally, we motioned to the waitress, and I said, "I'm getting really angry!" and I pulled out huge chunks of my hair.

chemo appointments, the drugs in those shots trashed my body; every inch would be so sore I'd feel like I had worked out for ten hours straight. My prework radiation sessions were easier—I would whip off my shirt, lie down for ten minutes and this big machine would hover over my breast and zap it—but nearly as exhausting.

All along, I was secretly terrified that no matter how good I was, no matter how disciplined, no matter how hard I smiled even if I felt like an aching,

I had my last radiation session in June, and the cancer shows no signs of returning. I'm a different person than I was two years ago. I used to have my whole life mapped out—"I'm going to work here for a few years, then here, then be a CEO and have four children"—but I've realized that you can't plan like that. It sounds clichéd, but I started living in the moment. When I finished treatment, I quit my job and joined two rock bands to pursue my dream of being a musician (I



April 27, 2000

Still playing, after three chemo sessions.



April 30, 2000

Wiggling out with my brother, Z, and good pal Gina.



May 12, 2000

Lony and Mike made sure to keep me smiling.



May 20, 2000

Even Lumpy looks good in my wig.

My friends got me through chemo—we'd order in pizza and watch *Tootsie* until I laughed so hard I forgot about the IV.

The waitress ran off screaming. She was actually *screaming*.

Soon after, I had one of my friends shave my head entirely—but only after we fooled around by giving me a Mohawk and two small tufts in the shape of devil horns. I wasn't comfortable going out in public completely bald, so I decided to get a wig. "This is not the time to have an identity crisis," the salesperson told me, suggesting I choose a model that would match my natural hair color. Screw that—if I had to wear a wig, I wanted one as stylish as possible. I went with a bright red shag with bangs for everyday wear and a glamorous platinum blond pixie cut for going out at night.

Wigs aside, my life wasn't particularly glam. I always felt queasy. I cried when I injected myself with painful shots at home. Though they increased my white blood cell count between

nauseous zombie, the cancer would come rushing back. The hospital arranged for me to join a support group of patients who were going through the same sort of hell; there are some things your friends just can't understand. The support group helped a lot.

play viola). Every day, I try to do something new, like explore an unfamiliar neighborhood, eat Turkish food, learn to skate. And to help educate other women, my friends and I plan to tour the documentary about my illness.

In July, when my hair started growing back, I met the guy I'm now dating. Even though we weren't together through my illness, I've told him all the grisly details and shown him photos of what I looked like before. He's made me promise never to grow my hair again. ■

The odds

What's your risk of getting breast cancer?

- **Your chances:** 1 in 8 women in the United States will develop breast cancer in her lifetime; 1 in 29 will die from it. Your chance of being diagnosed with breast cancer before age 30 is 1 in 2,212.
- **What you can do:** perform a monthly breast self-exam two to three days after your period ends. (For a refresher course, visit www.women.com/health/breastcancer/self-exam.html.) It's normal for breasts to feel a little lumpy and uneven, and it's normal for them to feel swollen and tender before and during your period. Once you're familiar

with your breasts' usual state, if you notice a lump that wasn't there before, a change in size or shape, a nipple discharge or pitting in the skin, see a doctor. "About 70 percent of lumps brought to a doctor's attention are not cancer," notes Terri Ades, director of health content for the American Cancer Society. But if the lump does turn out to be cancerous, the sooner you get medical help, the greater your chances of survival.

- **For more info:** visit the National Cancer Institute at www.nci.nih.gov or call (800) 4-CANCER.