

Profile in Courage: Virginia Isbell

By Tracie Momie



Be kind to everyone you meet because everyone has a story. This was the advice Virginia Isbell received from a priest at her mother's funeral. She had no idea how profoundly his words would impact her life.

Following the death of her mother in January 2002, the heartbreak continued for Isbell when her father passed away after a battle with lung cancer in February 2003 and her brother from a drug overdose in May 2003.

“It seemed as though I couldn't really grieve for one of them before there was another death.” Isbell laments.

Unfortunately, the losses that year would continue after her husband of 22 years died in August 2003.

In the middle of a restaurant that's surprisingly not very crowded for the midweek lunch hour, Isbell, 60, tells

her story. For almost two hours, the grandmother of one- reminisces, laughs raucously, gets melancholy and misty eyed but always manages to find something to smile about. These emotions pretty much symbolize how she lives her life.

Virginia, a middle child and only girl in her family, met John Isbell on a blind date several years after she divorced her first husband. She didn't know at the time he would become her second husband and the love of her life.

“Neither of us was looking for anything serious at the time. He was kind of cautious about relationships and I wasn't looking for a rebound.” she smiles as she recalls their mutual hesitancy to jump back into the dating pool.

John and Virginia were married in 1981 after dating for five years. They had two children, Kimberly and John III. The native Texans settled into the Katy area to raise their family. Life was good and they were very happy. But shortly before the death of her brother, Virginia's husband learned a small pimple on the back of his neck was a rare type of skin cancer.

He immediately had a biopsy to remove the cancer and started chemotherapy treatments. He developed pneumonia as a result of the chemotherapy and died in August 2003, four months after the cancer was removed.

Isbell said her faith in God and a strong will to make sure her children were taken care of got her through the years following John's death.

She says the support groups she joined to help her deal with her grief were also a saving grace. She joined one for survivors who had lost family members as well as one specifically for widows. The survivor group brought her and her older brother closer as they were able to attend meetings together and talk about losing their parents and their younger brother.

The widow's group introduced her to kindred spirits who knew exactly how she felt and it helped renew her spirit and made her realize she wasn't alone.

But just when things seemed to be getting better disaster struck again.

"I was giving myself a routine breast exam in the bath tub when I found a lump in my right breast." she recalls.

She also remembered the first thing she thought about was how hard it was going to be to break the news to her children. But it didn't end up being as hard as she thought although it didn't go quite as she planned.

"The two of them were yelling and fighting about something and I remember thinking, I'm going to kill them when I get out of here. And then I find this lump. I panicked and wrapped a towel around myself and went out to the living room and started yelling at them to stop arguing. I told them to stop fighting because I found a lump in my breast," she said there was dead silence and they both just stared at her.

"They thought I was just saying something to get them to stop fighting." she laughs at the absurdity of the moment.

But it wasn't a lie; it was a horrible truth that brought the three of them to tears as they cuddled together on the couch.

Isbell said even after it was discovered the lump was cancerous, she never thought she wouldn't survive. She said there really wasn't another option; her kids had already lost their father and grandparents. She had to survive.

The word survival seems almost inadequate to describe the journey Isbell embarked on. The cyst was much too large to operate on, so she had to take medicine to shrink it to an operable size and after seven months she had surgery to have it removed.

What started out as an initial lumpectomy (removal of the cyst) ended up being a mastectomy (removal of the entire breast) because the doctors couldn't get a clean border around the breast and they didn't want to risk the cancer spreading to the other breast or organs.

After the mastectomy, Isbell returned to work nine days later and would show up every day following her subsequent chemotherapy treatments.

When asked why she didn't take more time off she simply replied, "I wanted my kids to see me getting up and going to work, so they would feel like everything was okay. I knew that was

the only way I would be okay, if my kids were okay."

Isbell was employed by William Mercer Consulting at the time and added that her clients also relied heavily on her and she didn't want to let them down.

Eventually Isbell made it through chemotherapy and also radiation treatments.

A few months shy of her fourth year in remission, she was laid off from her job at Mercer after ten years of employment, due to the downturn in the economy.

Isbell once again persevered as a phone call from a former colleague landed her an opportunity to work a temporary job with Continental Airlines. She was hired on permanently with the carrier in May 2010.

Although a merger with United Airlines looms in the background and Isbell knows her future with the combined company is uncertain, she's confident she'll be okay.

"It's just one more thing I'll have to deal with and I'll do it again when the time comes."

She maintains an upbeat attitude although she has had her share of heartbreak and despite what life may have in store for her Isbell says she's ready to for the challenge. She's even open to the idea of dating again but she admits she is finding it to be a bit of a challenge meeting men these days.

"I meet men who like me but I don't like, and men who I do like but they don't like me. I feel like I'm 16 again."

At times she does seem decades younger than her actual age.

She's funny and feisty when she shares her secret for taking tequila shots (pineapple juice chaser); straightforward and sincere when talking candidly about her reconstructive breast surgery; and anxious and worried when she talks about the cost of her health insurance premiums.

But at the heart of it all, she is a survivor in every sense of the word.

"During my last doctor's appointment in May, I asked my doctor if I could officially call myself a breast cancer survivor and he said not yet. Apparently there is some magical number you have to get to," Isbell rolls her eyes playfully. "But I don't care because I'm still going to refer to myself as a survivor, because that's what I am."

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