
WHEN CANCER BECOMES “REAL” **ALLISON STANLEY**

Cancer changed my life in ways I never expected. We all find our own ways to deal with it, creating our own support groups as we go. I started mine by telling the world I had cancer.

These days, a person can go on reality TV for anything. Whether they are swapping moms, eating bugs, fighting for survival, dating average Joes, becoming an Idol, training to be a top model or getting “fired,” everyone seems to be searching for their idea of reality. I knew I wanted to learn to live again; maybe taking a chance on reality TV would help me open up about my life after breast cancer and show that cancer was ugly. But how real would everything be with the cameras rolling?

My reality TV experience kicked off when I was chosen from a pool of thousands to be on NBC’s award-winning reality TV show, “Starting Over.” The concept was simple -- a house full of women, each of us dealing with our own challenges. We would work to overcome those obstacles with the help of our peers and life coaches. I wanted my life to “start over,” especially after 22 weeks of chemo, lung damage from the “chemo-cocktail,” seven weeks of radiation, weight gain, hair loss, a bald head, loss of eye lashes, and the constant nausea and fatigue. The show would allow me to build a new life after cancer and tackle my lifelong self-esteem issues.

I had also been provided with the opportunity to visit a whole new regime of doctors to follow up with my health on the show. The odds of me being successful were good. In my mind, I was going to be living the American dream – living in the Hollywood hills, meeting movie stars and working with a major television network! All the while, America was by my side, rooting me on, by way of a camera following me everywhere I went.

When I started the show, I only had one breast. It was not until halfway through my stay on the first season that my doctors discovered that I had the BRCA-1 gene. This meant I was pre-disposed to cancer with a 60-80 percent chance of cancer returning to my other breast or uterus. I decided to have surgery to lower my risk of recurring cancer. Although I knew the reality show cameras wanted to show everything, I didn’t really realize what it would mean as they followed me to surgery.

My surgery, between seasons two and three, changed from a simple reconstruction to

the removal of my other breast, a full cut hysterectomy, followed by a tram flap reconstruction.

The camera crew tagged along to all of the pre-op appointments and never missed a tense moment, a scar, or an embarrassing question for the doctors. Surely, I thought, this was all the footage they needed; surely I'd get a moment of privacy for my surgery.

But then came the day that the doctor wanted to discuss my tram flap reconstruction. With Iyanla Vanzant, my life coach, by my side, I was naked with one breast and a heavily burned, scarred, concaved area exposed where the other breast should be. I stood there trying to hold back the tears.

The cameras were still rolling.

The doctor grabbed the fat roll around my stomach to see if there was enough fatty tissue to create two new breasts. The producers were looking on and the doctor just held my fat bunched in his hand. All of these eyes were on me, and I just couldn't take it anymore.

Being in front of the camera all the time.

Knowing America would see me like this.

Remembering how ugly cancer was.

My self-esteem was shattered. I broke down. I was not sharing anymore. I told the producers I was done, they could find someone else. The cameras stopped. As I put my hands to my face to catch the tears, I heard the voice of Iyanla.

"You must go on because what you are doing here today in front of these cameras will change many people's lives. Allison, for someone facing these same issues, you will be their Bible."

Was she serious? This was my reality. I was naked, exposed and so vulnerable. All I am was out in the open. After that moment of feeling sorry for myself, I thought about all of the other cancer victims going through the same thing and it all made sense. I knew what I had to do. It was a moment I'd never forget.

I realized that I had to be vulnerable for everyone facing cancer. I had to be vulnerable because people needed to know that cancer was ugly – and it always will be. It forces even the strongest to flail. But we have to be vulnerable and embrace it.

In the end, I remembered the beauty of everything life still offered me. I am flawed, scarred and burned, but I am also brave. I was strong enough to let others in to support me, to let them see what I was going through, even if my audience was America. That's the only way I made it through the ugliness of cancer. If you embrace who you are and

what you can do, you will have all you need to get yourself emotionally through cancer, whether it is in front of millions or on your own.

Today I live, laugh and love the imperfect reality of what I went through and am still going through. And I'm not looking back.

Allison Stanley is a breast cancer survivor and awareness advocate. Known for her role on the Emmy award winning NBC program, "Starting Over," the country watched as Allison struggled to overcome lifelong self-esteem issues and adjust to her new body after breast cancer. Since leaving the show, Allison has become committed to providing hope, inspiration and empowerment to others who are undergoing cancer treatment or struggling through any obstacles in life. For more information on Allison or for resources on cancer, visit www.allisonstanley.com