

2015 Best Gay of City

2nd Annual Readers' Choice

FREE 3-DAY CRUNCH PASS TO ALL WHO REGISTER
Voters will be entered for a chance to win an iPad Mini, Broadway Tickets, and more!

click here to vote!

[Home](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Contests & Sweepstakes](#) | [Our Staff](#) | [In Print](#) | [Get updates](#) | [Ad Info](#)

🔍 Search in site...



Why We're Pink

Our best scoops come from you, our...

Chelseanow



Her Cancer Was No Show Stopper

BY DUSICA SUE MALESEVIC | When performer...

[HOME](#) [NEWS](#) [EDITORIAL](#) [HEALTH](#) [WHY PINK?](#) [ARTS](#) [JUST DO ART](#) [SPECIAL SECTIONS](#) [JOBS](#) [ADVERTISE](#)

[Calendar](#) [Contests & Sweepstakes](#) [Our Staff](#) [In Print](#) [Get updates](#) [Ad Info](#) [Classified Advertising](#) [Jobs](#)

Thursday, October 01, 2015

For Queer Cancer Survivors, It's Not All About Pink Ribbons

Added by **Scott Stiffler** on September 30, 2015.
Saved under **News, Why Pink?**

Share This Post



Melanie Testa had a bilateral mastectomy, saying that it was important to have symmetry in her breasts.
Photo by Damon Dahlen.

BY WINNIE McCROY | Before you pull out your “I Heart Boobies” bracelet and pink ribbons in support of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, look at the facts: about 58 percent of women who have mastectomies don’t choose breast reconstruction. Women — especially those who identify as queer — are rejecting the notion that the breasts make the woman. Some have even started the FlatTopper Pride movement, a push for acceptance of women who choose to live

with a flat, scarred chest rather than get reconstruction or wear prosthetics to conform to what society deems “normal.”

FROM OUR SISTER NEWSPAPERS

“October is a very difficult month for those of us who have been diagnosed with breast cancer, whether or not we’re queer,” said Melanie Testa, co-founder of the FlatTopper Pride movement. This movement first garnered media attention when comedian Tig Notaro w breast cancer, had a double mastectomy, and removed her shirt during her P (Squadron comes out against housing on Elizabeth St. Garden

“ Following a hero’s footsteps

body.” Notaro told Esquire at the time, adding, “My body is healed and I’m l

s Strike a pose

1 Taking a stand against harassment by construction

Michael Beckwith, noting that it was important to have symmetry in her

Breasties: Finding new friends

“When I was diagnosed with cancer, I had DD-sized breasts, and I definitely needed a single breast removed,” she told Chelsea Now. “I could not imagine life with a single breast. I would have felt like I needed to wear a prosthesis to even myself out. So I chose fla

wanted to present myself in a way that would make me comfortable.”

Funny about cancer

What she got instead was a litany of second messages from the insurance con

Reanimating classic stories at Lovecraft Festival

6 Battery Park City to get its first ‘taste’ of food fundraisers Sunday

1 The rosy side of the pink cancer: new friendships

t Seaport Museum picking up key support for new grant

have different needs.

Testa said that our society offers breast reconstruction as a fix, a way for people without cancer to have a solid, nothing. It’s a horse and pony show. The real thing is we have breast cancer, which kills women. It’s taking away from the fact that a whole lot of women are getting cancer, some of whom are going to die from it.

GAY CITY NEWS

Pride movement

Victory Announced in 25-Year St. Patrick’s Day Boycott

Before Manhattan LGBT Crowd, Obama Offers Triumphant Case for His Presidency

“Candles For Clemency” Claims Victory

Father John McNeill, Gay Catholic Pioneer, Dead at 90

Gender Pioneer

EAST VILLAGER NEWS

Among powerful friends, Chin enters her second term

Top cop says special unit, outreach can cut thefts

Muscle-headed gym keeps flouting regs with illegal signage

Judge says city broke the law by approving N.Y.U. superblocs plan

De Blasio seems on same page with evicted news vendor

all community; we ar

ADVERTISING JOBS RSS

↑ CHELSEANOW.COM

ONE METROTECH, 10TH FLOOR | NYC, NY 11201 | PHONE: 212.229.1890

Emily Jensen was only 31 years old when she got her diagnosis of breast cancer. It was August 2012, and she was aware that she had perhaps waited too long to have the large growth above her breast checked out.

“Sure enough, the next day I got a phone call at work to inform me that I had a particularly aggressive and fast-growing tumor and Infiltrating Ductal Carcinoma. The other biopsies showed that the lumps in my right breast were benign,” said Jensen.

Because of the size of the tumor, lumpectomy was not an option. Jensen said she knew she would lose her left breast, and debated for a while whether or not she wanted to keep her right breast. Ultimately she decided it was in her best interest not to, as it too had lumps, for which she had already had a lumpectomy two years earlier.

“From a pragmatic standpoint, it made sense to remove both breasts and then not have to continue to come in for breast imaging and worry if the lumps were malignant. Ultimately my surgeon — an amazingly talented and supportive queer woman of color with an understanding of social oppression — thought this was the best option as well,” said Jensen.

Jensen didn’t always like the attention her breasts received. She sometimes even wore a binder to work. For her, having a flat chest was more in keeping with her gender identity. It was also the option that came with the least amount of medical intervention and trauma possible.

“I loved my breasts, so I wanted them or none,” said Jensen. “I think that my queer identity helped make this choice to stay flat easier. As a more androgynous person, I felt much less pressure to conform to hegemonic beauty standards.”

Jensen advocates that all women have the tools to make the most informed, educated and self-affirming choice possible, even if that choice includes reconstruction or prosthetics. But as part of her effort to allow women to be comfortable in their own skin, she launched the website FlatTopper Pride, to spread awareness of flat presentation as a choice.

“Only when you’re comfortable in your own skin, when you have come to terms with your own body, can you fully heal,” she said. “It is crucial that we call out systems of oppression which keep women from having greater autonomy.”

Even though the majority of women don’t have reconstruction, Jensen said it was rare to see a body like hers before their campaign took off. Before surgery, she had seen only one — another patient her surgeon introduced her to.

2 of 5

10/1/15, 1:30 PM

The myth is that you are as good as new after surgery — but reconstruction does not create breasts that look or feel genuine, said Testa. What cancer left her is a 17-inch, numb scar across her chest.

Many breast cancer survivors are also furious that the pink ribbon mishegoss takes real attention away from the fact that very few research dollars' fund research on metastatic breast cancer, which kills 40,000 women a year.

"Many people do not understand how gendered breast cancer treatment is, from the pinking of everything imaginable to the pressure for breast reconstruction," said Liz Margolies, a Chelsea resident who is head of the National LGBT Cancer Network. "Many of the support groups and workshops have names like 'Look Good, Feel Great' and offer hair, makeup and prosthetic advice. The standard of beauty is a stereotypical one that appeals to heterosexual men mainly. Many lesbians and bisexual women find reconstruction abhorrent and unnecessary. For transgender men with breast cancer, the pinking, the reconstruction talk and the beauty workshops intensify their invisibility."

Margolies said that what interests her most these days is these queer breast cancer survivors who have had mastectomies without any kind of reconstruction or nipple tattoo.

"Their chests are completely smooth, except for the remnants of surgical scars, and the FlatToppers expose them proudly," said Margolies. "They are a strong visual message that it is okay for all women to make any decision they want about their bodies, and that there are multiple ways to be beautiful and sexy after cancer treatment."

Hegemonic beauty standards perpetuate capitalism and allow women's bodies to become commodified, noted Jensen. When this happens, we lose agency and autonomy; people think they can tell women how to treat their own bodies. This is a kind of violence, she said. Such strict beauty standards are impossible for most people to achieve, which leaves many feeling marginalized or not as valuable as human beings.

"Breasts don't make me. I'm a female woman. I express who I am on a daily basis, sometimes more masculine, sometimes more feminine," echoed Testa. "I much prefer having my health than my breasts."

Testa said that she isn't advocating for all women to remove their breasts and have a flat presentation; she is only advocating for body positivity, to empower women to do what's best for them. She was originally spurred to act after meeting a 70-year-old breast cancer survivor who hated her single-breast prosthesis her whole life.

"How can you present a body that you're not in agreement with for so long?," wondered Testa. "It spurred me to step in and populate the visual references for the flat-chested body. If we have images and role models, we will feel more comfortable with who we are."

This February, Jensen and Testa joined the Rainbow Fashion 2015 Pride Show in Times Square, posing topless for Play Out Underwear. The two dressed up like Barbie and Ken, to toy with the idea of the perfect body. Walking the runway had an impact on everyone who saw the show, and helped make it happen.



Jodi Jaecks and Emily Jensen, in the Play Out wired briefs campaign. Photo by Candace Doyal.

"It was fantastic to walk along with transsexuals, gays and straights. It was an amazing endeavor," said Testa. The campaign went viral, reaching women from Japan to Greece to Denmark to Russia, and sent scores of average women to the FlatTopper website, where Testa shares her thoughts.

And on September 11, Glamour Magazine showed "What Breast Cancer Really Looks Like." Jensen was among the five women profiled, as agents of change rather than passive victims of disease.

"I think it was revolutionary for Glamour to use a picture of a FlatTopper. However, it shouldn't seem revolutionary when the majority of women who have a mastectomy don't reconstruct! It shouldn't be shocking to see a surgical outcome like mine," said Jensen.

"For one, it shows that not all women choose to reconstruct," added Testa. "It goes a long way toward normalizing this choice. Having those images in a mainstream, straight magazine is very important."

Jensen notes it was a way to show that breast cancer can be the impetus for effecting positive change in the world. Rather than being something she merely "survived," breast cancer was the fissure in her life that allowed her to rebuild herself anew, and to work toward making the world a better place.

"Cancers of the breasts and reproductive organs can completely disrupt the gender binary," says Jensen. "It's not that I am a beautiful woman, despite not having breasts. It's that I am a beautiful person, and my having or not having breasts is irrelevant."

Perhaps movements like FlatTopper Pride will shed light on the fact that instead of just throwing more pink ribbons at it, what society really needs to do is honestly address the growing rate of breast cancer.

"There is no denying our reality any more. Cancer is not going away," said Testa frankly. "For some reason, society believes that most women reconstruct after breast cancer treatment, and that's just not the truth. So we are creating an atmosphere where there is safety and respect for all forms of the female body, breasted or not. No matter what our bodies look like or what we're forced to embrace after breast cancer treatment, we should feel proud, embodied and whole."

For more information, visit flattopperpride.org.

1 Comment

Sort by



Add a comment...



Liz Margolies ·

Psychotherapist at Private Practice

You can also learn more about LGBT people and cancer at the National LGBT Cancer Network, www.cancer-network.org

Like · Reply ·  1 · 3 hrs

 Facebook Comments Plugin

Socialize



DreamJobsNYC



Sponsored Content

DTV Installations LLC
SMART HOME FOR SMART PEOPLE
Since 2007

ADOPT-A-GERANIUM



Wednesday, October 7, 2015
10 A.M. – Noon | Rain or shine
Bowling Green Park

ON STAGE AT
KINGSBOROUGH (718)368-5596



TAP CITY
The Best of the
New York City
Tap Festival

October 2, 2015
8:00 p.m. | \$35/30

COSMETOLOGIST



- ELECTROLYSIS & WAX
- FACIALS & BODY SKIN TREATMENTS
- ANTI-CELLULITE
- ANTI-STRETCHING
- SPIDER VEINS
- RUBY POINTS
- CHERRY SPOTS
- PIGMENT SPOTS
- MICRONEEDLING
- DERMABRASION

Leonora's
Cosmetology