

Beverly Kirkhart

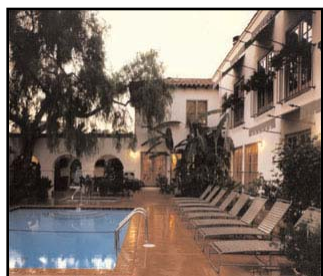
TURNING SETBACKS INTO COMEBACKS

For 17 years, Beverly Kirkhart had lived a storybook existence. No one, least of all her, could have predicted it would end suddenly in divorce, bankruptcy, the loss of her home, and the sacrifice of the business she had built from scratch and managed for over ten years. Through the worst of it, she used to joke to friends: "At least I have my health!" Then came the devastating news: "Beverly, you have breast cancer."



Following is the story of how this admired survivor turned lemons into lemonade...and became her own hero.

While studying for a degree in business administration at the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, Beverly met her college sweetheart, an architectural student. Following graduation they got married and moved to the picturesque quaint beach town of Santa Barbara, California.



In 1981, Beverly with her husband and another couple, renovated a Spanish Colonial Revival structure, built in 1931, into a romantic 18 room inn. The Villa

Rosa soon became one of Santa Barbara's landmark small hotels, only 84 steps from the Pacific Ocean.

Beverly spent the next decade managing it, while her husband established his own prominent architectural firm. They went on to design and build their dream home, which was

featured in *Sunset Magazine*, in Santa Barbara's lush foothills. Beverly loved her life.

But her dream life shattered in 1991. Her marriage ended in a divorce, she was forced to file bankruptcy, losing her business and home. She was financially devastated. The woman who had once served as one of the region's business leaders - as president of the city's convention and tourism bureau, co-founder of the Lodging Association of Santa Barbara, and creator of their visitor's information center - was now penniless. When she could, she house-sat. When there was nowhere to go, she often spent nights sleeping in her car.

THE DIAGNOSIS

Just when it didn't seem possible that things could get worse, in October Beverly's gynecologist discovered a lump in her breast during a routine exam. The needle biopsy showed it was benign, and the doctor advised her to watch for any changes. Six months later, while she was showering, Beverly felt it again. This time it had grown to the size of a pea. "I just knew it was breast cancer." So, she returned to the doctor, who did another needle biopsy.



Unfortunately cancer ran in Beverly's family. Here is Beverly with her sister, who has survived breast cancer twice

Concerned, he sent her to a breast surgeon, who removed it. A few days later, she heard from her surgeon, who confirmed her nightmare – she had breast cancer.

"I was just stunned," she recalls. "I was standing there frozen in fear. Haven't I dealt with enough adversities and now I have to go through this! This can't be happening to me! At first, I was in denial. No, it's not me. Then shock, what do I do? I was just lifeless. I was empty. I was kicked down."

Unfortunately, cancer ran in Beverly's family. Her sister had survived breast cancer twice, the second time requiring a mastectomy. Her mother and grandmother had died of colon cancer, and two of her father's brothers were killed by the disease.

After investigating her options, Beverly settled on traditional treatment, supplemented by diet, yoga, exercise, and meditation. For a year, she was consumed with chemo, radiation treatments and doctor's appointments. She lost her hair twice, but was relieved of a mastectomy.

"At the end, I was so exhausted, it was like crawling across the finish line," she relates. "It was just a nightmare. I couldn't get out of bed. I couldn't focus on anything."

Meanwhile, Beverly was working as a development consultant for non-profit organizations. The hardest part, she recalls, was trying to pretend everything was normal around male clients, while showing up to meetings wearing wigs.

She has never relapsed. Even though her doctor wouldn't say she was cancer-free until five years from diagnosis, "my attitude was that I was cancer free the minute I got through with my treatments." Indeed, Beverly celebrates each new birthday not as another year of getting older, but another year of survival.

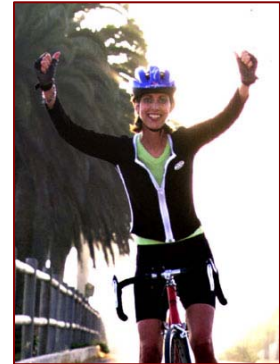
Her First Major Turning Point

Six months after her last chemotherapy treatment, Kirkhart met a friend who was going through similar treatments. "We both had been poked, jabbed, prodded, examined like objects, and we had had enough! We began to talk about what brought us joy, happiness and personal

satisfaction in our lives. One thing we had in common was our love for bike riding."

Suddenly inspired, Beverly decided to turn her setback into a comeback. She signed up for The Century Ride - a 100-mile bike ride up the coast above Santa Barbara. "I'd never done anything that physical in my life, even when I was healthy." She began training every day, covering her bedroom with affirmations written on Post-it notes to keep herself focused.

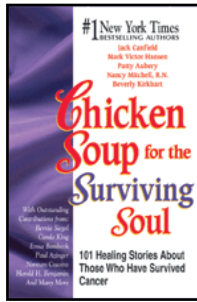
Ride day turned out to be cold and windy. "I hit severe head winds. I felt like I was riding a stationary bike - pedaling and pedaling, but getting no-where." After a short lunch break at the 50-mile mark, she got back on the bike and headed south. "My back began to scream, every body part ached, including a few I didn't know I owned." But it looked like she'd make it.



Then at the 90-mile mark - after 7 ½ hours in the saddle - Beverly encountered a mountain that she had to climb in order to reach the finish line. "I was near collapse. I just wanted to get off the bike and hitchhike home." It was at that moment of desperation, with everything she had survived in the previous year flashing through her mind, that Beverly determined she would do it. So she switched into the lowest gear and standing on her pedals, stubbornly inched her way up.

"As I flew down the backside of the mountain and crossed the finish line, I knew that I was my own hero. I was a survivor. I had summoned the courage to reclaim my life. There was nothing I couldn't handle now. And even though I had lost my marriage, my money, and for a while, my health, I hadn't lost myself. When I crossed that finish line, I knew I was my own hero."

Becoming A Nationally-Known Speaker



In the fall of 1994, Beverly attended a self-esteem seminar led by Jack Canfield, co-creator of the best-selling Chicken Soup series of inspirational books. He had just released *Chicken Soup for the Surviving Soul*® and asked if anyone in the audience would like to speak at an upcoming kick-off event for the book in Southern California.

Beverly surprised herself by raising her hand. "Trust me, I never raised my hand on anything! I was the most bashful person in the whole world. I don't know where it came from, but I raised my hand and said, I want to tell my story!"

After appearing before a crowd of 350, Beverly was approached by Canfield to become a co-author on future editions of the book, and join his speaker's bureau - which began booking her for cancer events around the country. With the help of Toastmasters, Beverly was able to conquer her fear of public speaking.

The inspiration behind her book, My Healing Companion



During her first year as a speaker, people continually ask her, how she was coping with cancer and how she got through it. "These survivors were hungry for tips on how to survive. They'd ask me things like 'What were your survival tools?' 'When did you begin to believe you would survive?' 'How did you find the confidence to speak up to your doctor?' 'Do you have a handout of your presentation that I can take home with me?'

She remembers: "I wanted to help in the worst way. I wanted to leave a piece of me with them, to give them hope that they, too, could make it. But how? What can I give them? Handouts, a video, a book? For some reason, none of these excited me, especially the book idea. I'm not a writer; writing has always been a struggle for me."

The inspiration for *My Healing Companion* struck during a speaking engagement for a cancer awareness program in Connecticut. That evening in her hotel room, Beverly got a vision of a journal. She had kept a journal throughout her own ordeal. Even the title of the book suddenly came to her.

After returning to California, Beverly met with a graphic designer who sketched the cover and layout on a napkin. Even though she was eager to get started, Beverly soon discovered that it wasn't going to be as easy as she had thought. The problem: "I had to relive the excruciating times of my cancer experience. I was completely unaware of how much I had buried my painful feelings of this memory."

She struggled each day, taking excerpts from her own journal - such as "I feel so out of control, beaten down, worthless...why live another day?" "My heart truly hurt to read those words. It was hard to believe that I had been that depressed and lifeless for literally years."

Ultimately, it took over three years to complete the project. "All along this writing journey, I had to make choices. I set up self-imposed deadlines with completion dates for each chapter. This created tension with my family and friends, because there were a lot of times when I'd be invited to parties, holiday events, trips, whatever. I had to choose: do I push back the deadline or do I participate in this event? For three and half years, the writing came first."

It was a sacrifice she would happily do again. "It was a healing process for me, but more importantly this book represents a deep sense of giving back to help anyone else facing their own hardship."