And so it goes: Ellerbee shares her breast-cancer battle

Only dead fish swim upstream," said the woman with the short crop of brunette hair addressing a capacity crowd filling the ballroom of The Four Seasons Hotel, Newport Beach. She was delighted to have the short crop of hair. In her own words, she is "a victor, not just a survivor of breast cancer."

She is Linda Ellerbee, journalist, author, lecturer, producer, and a survivor of breast cancer, whom she learned about in her 30s. By the time she finished her career as a reporter and host of "60 Minutes," she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Her treatment was worse. "I cried. I lost my hair. I lived," she said in her authoritative style.

Her cancer story has been well documented in the media. "At first, I wanted it kept private. But it was nobody's business. My colleagues honored my wishes."

Then one day the phone rang, and it was a reporter from USA Today. He told her that the paper was running with her story the next day. "Did I wish to comment?"

"I don't think so," she remembered her that everyone in the industry knew that "she had both of her breasts cut off. It was no secret." A gasep of horror spread throughout the hotel ballroom. It was 1979, and it was a reporter from USA Today.

Laughter has been another of the sustaining factors in Ellerbee's life. She insisted that her grown daughter, a music student in Seattle, fly east for surgery and miss school. "I'll spend time with you over summer vacation," said Ellerbee. She'll never forget her daughter's reaction seeing her mother that summer. "I was in my bathroom standing in front of the mirror. I was too fat and I looked terrible." She then went on to tell her that she was going to get a new look in the mirror. She was told to shed her baggy clothes and to wear a new dress. "I was so preoccupied with the chemotherapy and the breast cancer that I didn't notice the difference." She also learned that she was not the only one who had breast cancer. "Breasts are a big deal in America," continued Ellerbee.

When a woman loses her breasts, it is as if her femininity is in question. It is the same for a man with AIDS. His masculinity is in question. Because Americans are so attached to their sexual identity, and that identity is so narrowly defined, often only by the size of the breast and the size of the body.

On another occasion, Ellerbee was walking her golden retriever. As she was walking the dog, she noticed a young woman with breast cancer. "I was so preoccupied with the chemotherapy and the breast cancer that I didn't notice the difference." She then went on to tell her that she was not the only one who had breast cancer. 

breast cancer survivor, the very existence of an organ, the issue is often kept secret. The secret is deadly.

Ellerbee is one of the lucky ones. Breast cancer has been on the rise since the 1940s. The numbers are horrific, and scientists do not have an explanation. Fifty years ago, one in 20 women was diagnosed with breast cancer. Today, it is nearly one in six or seven. "Today, I owe a debt to USA Today for printing my story. The anger was replaced by thousands of letters that poured in from women around the nation. That mail actually sustained me through one of the darkest periods of my life."

She has been a network journalist for more than 20 years. "I'm used to being in the public eye," she said. "I've been on '60 Minutes' for more than 20 years. I've been on '20/20' for more than 10 years. I've been on 'Nightline' for more than 15 years."

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Speaker Linda Ellerbee is flanked by Pat McFarland (left) and brunch chairwoman Arden Flammer. Her acclaimed TV news for children on the Nickelodeon Network. Her goal was to share her experience.

"I have learned that what I need is some sort of balance in my life. I will never be a workaholic again. Perhaps the cancer did this to me. Perhaps it is just maturity. I'm proud and happy to be 50. I love my man, my children... gosh, I even like my children, and I've found a physical and spiritual rush from walking in the woods. Can you imagine... a 50-year-old woman who has discovered camping?" Ellerbee added, "I can assure you I will not be on my deathbed lamenting that I did not spend more time at the office."

Sandy Sewell chaired the Ellerbee event with Arden Flammer, who delivered a most distinguished and generous introduction of the speaker. Judy Steel chaired the underwriting, and a Circle 1000 committee included Hyla Bertea, Pat Cox, Jodi Greenbaum, Nora Johnson, Sharon Pettis, Virginia Zens, and Ginny Uebelhoer and Frances Applegate. Spotted in the crowd were Judie Argyros, Lillian Flou, Charley and Nora Hester, Richard and Lynette Berg, Pat McFarland and Sue Winn.

What does Linda Jane Ellerbee hope to be doing at age 60? "Living on the water in Newport Beach and going to The Four Seasons Hotel to listen to somebody else make a speech."

B.W. Cook's column appears Thursday and Saturdays.