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Group brings music, healing to those with breast cancer

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Being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness can tilt a person's world off its axis.

This is an experience Laura Fial knows well. A Valley vocal performer for more than 20 years, she knew she wanted to be a singer "from the first day I saw 'Funny Girl' back in the '60s and fell in love with Barbra Streisand, my idol."



Members of the Soul Survivors smile during a fall 2003 recording session at Living Head Studios. In the front row, from left, are Pam Andelora and Mary Price. Back row, from left, are Donna Begs, Cathy Oliveri, Elena San Felipo, Edie Pernick-Gold, the late Marilyn Nierenberg-Shaoul, Carolyn Smith, Leah Polasik and Laura Fial.
Photo by Timothy Robertson

However, her childhood dream was put on hold when in 2000, at the age of 40, the professional singer was diagnosed with breast cancer.

All within the span of a week, her husband left and the members of her band "could not deal with the illness and said 'you're fired,'" she explained by e-mail.

With her life seemingly in shreds, she said, she went through her "own pity party over and over again."

As part of the prescription for recovery, Fial's doctor recommended she "focus on something I had a real passion for, and suggested music," telling Fial that "happiness, laughter and a passion for what you like and adore will aid in your recovery."

"What did I have to lose?" she added.

Thus Soul Survivors was born in October 2000, a musical support group for those battling breast cancer. The group comprises women currently treating breast cancer, and those in recovery. The group is not "necessarily a choir, but a group that could start to heal through our music," she said.

Fial understood the healing powers of music from an early age.

"As far back as junior high ... when you had all those teenage pressures, music and singing always seemed to make the day better. It healed back then and still does today at 45 years of age."

Fial said that, after speaking with more than 70 interested women, she decided not to hold auditions.

"We agreed if you came out of the initial diagnosis still breathing, talking, singing or skipping, you were a Soul Survivor," she says.

The group meets 7-8:30 p.m. the first and third Monday of each month at the Virginia G. Piper Cancer Center at Scottsdale Healthcare, Shea Campus. The group usually has a music therapist from the center at rehearsals, as well as a student studying music therapy and a piano player.

The group performs at several charity events each year. They have performed the national anthem at sporting events, performed at fundraisers during Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and appeared with Fial during her nightclub and restaurant gigs, as well as on television.

The group also records one compact disc a year. Its most recent release is "The

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Group brings music, healing to those with breast cancer
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Soul Survivors 'Live'," recorded during a performance at Picasso's restaurant in Scottsdale. All proceeds go to The Marilyn Nierenberg-Shaoul Scholarship Fund, from which a yearly award is given to a "student or medical institution that supports breast cancer patients," according to the group's Web site.

"Imagine having gone through breast cancer, and then three months later you are in a recording studio being treated like a real singing star," says Fial. "We enjoy those recording sessions."

Fial says membership in the group has had a positive effect on her recovery.

Feeling depressed after her mastectomy, she said she remembers begging her doctor to allow her to resume performing. He recommended a six-week recovery period, which she stuck to, but as she resumed performing she noticed "the aches and pains seemed to go away right after that first walk on the stage."

She also says she can see a difference in the members.

"I also see the joy, laughter and bonding that goes on in our own Soul Survivors group. We leave everything at the door on those nights and sing for the cure ... When we leave, we remember we may still have cancer or may be recovering, but we bought ourselves a pretty special evening.

"We touch a lot of special feelings in people who feel this is a way to give back, bring something positive out of the arduous treatment."

Edie Pernick-Gold, a member of the group since its inception, agrees.

After seeing an ad in a local paper for the group, the 68-year-old mental-health therapist "called immediately because I love to sing. Singing is therapy for me."

"While I am singing, I cannot and I do not think of anything else but the music – the music and the words." She said that no matter what is going on in life, "I'm singing, and that is therapy in itself."

Beyond the therapeutic aspects of singing, listening to the stories of the other women helps her understand the many effects cancer can have on a human life.

"Seeing the women, hearing their stories and feeling sympathetic toward them is very key to my life," she explains. "For me, this has been an incredible opportunity to be with other women who have gone through the same thing" and those who are dealing with "issues I have not experienced."

"What if it would have been me? What if it ever is me?" she says. "How would I handle myself? What would I do? I think about all the stories I've heard and I realize I would be fine, and therefore they will be fine.

"It has given me new insight," she says.

"We see ourselves as soulful and therefore, survivors. We're not there for a pity party, we're there to bring happiness to our souls."



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