



a story of father-daughter survival

For Paul Ott Carruth and his daughter Carla, breast cancer was a wake-up call for awareness.

by lisa lafontaine bynum | photography by daniel and stephanie

Cancer.

It's one of the most dreaded words in our language. It's that uninvited guest that everyone hopes will never make an appearance in their family. Country singer and television and radio personality Paul Ott Carruth and his family unfortunately know cancer all too well. Their story began in 1982, when Paul's wife Alberta was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at the age of 42.

After an 18-month battle, Alberta passed away, leaving behind Paul and their three children—Paul Jr., Carla, and Bert.

Carla Carruth Tigner was in college when she lost her mother. Since then, she remained vigilant in keeping up with her healthcare. When Carla reached her early 40s, she began experiencing some health problems. Because of her family history of ovarian cancer, Carla and her doctors decided a hysterectomy was the best course of prevention. The same week Carla was scheduled to have the hysterectomy, she discovered a lump in her right breast during a self-exam.

A mammogram showed no sign of the lump in Carla's right breast. However, it did detect an anomaly in her left breast. A subsequent ultrasound determined the anomaly to be pre-calcification. Carla's doctor's decided to recheck her breasts in six months and proceeded with the hysterectomy.

Looking back on those events, Carla now wishes she had gotten a second opinion. Six months later, the lump in Carla's right breast had grown. Twenty-one years after her mother received her diagnosis of ovarian cancer, Carla was told she had breast cancer. "I was the exact same age, and it was the exact same month that my mother received her diagnosis," Carla reveals. "I remember I was so nervous about telling my father. He had already lost a wife to cancer and now I had to tell him that his daughter had cancer."

It was determined that Carla's tumor was estrogen-fed, meaning that the hormone replacement therapy she underwent immediately after her hysterectomy had allowed the tumor to grow. "I cannot stress enough how important it is for people to be a champion for their own healthcare," she says. "Doctors are human, and they make mistakes. I should have



LEFT TO RIGHT: Carla and Paul enjoy playing tennis together. Paul's first wife, Alberta, passed away from cancer at age 42. She is seen here as Miss Louisiana discussing the crowning of her successor with Governor Long. Cruising in his boat in southwest Mississippi, Carla and Paul enjoy a sunny afternoon.

insisted that my doctor conduct a breast exam and have the lump biopsied." Carla underwent a bilateral mastectomy followed by aggressive chemotherapy. One year later, she received the news that she was cancer-free.

However, cancer would come knocking on the Carruths' door again, only not in a way that anybody ever expected. A year after Carla's recovery, while she and her father were recording an episode of Paul's weekly television and radio show, *Listen to the Eagle*, he noticed a tender spot in his left breast. "Carla elbowed me in the chest and I commented that it had hurt," Paul shares. "Carla joked with me about it. She said, 'Oh Daddy, you don't have breast cancer!' and I said, 'You better believe I don't!' I had never heard of a man getting breast cancer."

Still, the tenderness concerned Paul's wife Lynda enough that she strongly urged him to make an appointment with his doctor two days later. Unlike Carla, a mammogram revealed that a lump was indeed present in Paul's breast. Even though Paul's doctor wasn't worried about it, he decided to remove the lump and have it tested just the same. "My doctor told me that he had biopsied around 100 men in my situation, and all the results had come back benign," adds Paul.

However, as soon as Paul came out from anesthesia, his doctor shared with him that preliminary lab tests showed

the lump was in fact cancerous. It was sent off for additional testing, and a week later the results were in. "My doctor said, 'I have good news and I have bad news. The bad news is that it's cancer,' Paul reveals. "'The good news is that the tumor is dead.' The medical term is 'necrotic,' meaning that somehow the blood supply to the tumor was cut off and it died. But I have another name for it—divine intervention."

Paul had the breast removed and opted not to undergo any further treatment. Lynda, Paul's wife of 28 years, saw him through the surgery and the subsequent recovery. "I would not have made it through this without her great loving care," Paul says. "My entire family—all my kids and 13 grandchildren—calls her the MVP of the bunch." Today, both Paul and Carla remain cancer-free.

It should come as no surprise that their tale of father-daughter breast cancer survival has attracted not only local but national media attention. In 2007, Stephanie Bell Flynt, healthcare reporter with Jackson's NBC-affiliate WLBT, ran a series of stories on the pair and submitted the series to *The Today Show*. Paul, Carla, and Carla's son were flown to New York City and given the chance to tell their story to *Today Show* host Matt Lauer on national television. "The day we taped the show was the same day that [*Today Show* host] Hoda Kotb returned to work after undergoing treatment for her breast cancer," Car-



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Carruth clan, including all 5 children and 13 grandchildren, in a family portrait. Carla and Paul enjoyed the beautiful grounds of his home. Lynda, Paul's wife of 28 years, was his rock during his battle with cancer.



la says. "The entire show was dedicated to breast cancer and awareness."

Paul and Carla were also given the rare opportunity to share their story in a music video for country music singer Martina McBride's "I'm Gonna Love You Through It." Because of the song's lyrics, which tell of a woman's fight with breast cancer, producers opted to include testimonials from actual breast cancer survivors throughout the video. While on the set of the video, Carla and Paul met hundreds of other breast-cancer survivors, including *Good Morning America* (GMA) host and Mississippi native Robin Roberts, who publicly shared her own battle with breast cancer in 2007. Roberts later premiered the emotional video during an episode of *GMA*.

"Daddy and I didn't know if we would even make the video or not," says Carla. "But as I sat there watching the video and seeing Robin get so emotional from it, I was just bawling by the end. It was amazing and so moving to see. There were literally hundreds of people there the day of the shoot, and it was unbelievable to see so many people were touched by the disease."

Today, Paul and Carla are both active public speakers for breast-cancer awareness. Paul urges men to be proactive about their health. While the American Cancer Society estimates that only 1 percent of breast cancer diagnoses are in men, men are needlessly dying from the disease because of lack of aware-

ness or because of embarrassment. "When I was on the *Today Show*, Matt Lauer asked me if having breast cancer was considered less masculine," says Paul. "I told him it's a matter of living or dying. It doesn't matter where the disease is located, cancer is cancer."

Adds Paul, "There is a lot of awareness about breast cancer in women, but not a lot about breast cancer in men. Scientists have come a long way with treatment, so more women are surviving. But men are dying."

Carla shares her story in hopes that she can create awareness and provide hope to other breast-cancer patients and their caregivers. "Many cancer survivors don't want to talk about it because they think either no one wants to hear about it or it is just too painful and emotional to share," Carla says. "However, it is so important to share your story because you never know who you can help or provide hope and inspiration to."

Adds Carla, "Having breast cancer was never something I would have asked for, but I wouldn't give the experience back. It has changed me as a person and has allowed God to use me for the better." M