

Breast Reconstruction

A patient's guide to understanding her treatment options

Life after breast cancer

Survivors help women rebuild their lives

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RECONSTRU



DUCTED:

Art exhibition puts cancer survivors' scars on display

By Kendra Y. Mims

"There is beauty in imperfection."

ASPS member Jonathan Bank, MD, is on a mission to help women wear their scars with pride.

After watching a video his breast reconstruction patient sent him on *kintsugi* – the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold and highlighting the cracks – Dr. Bank felt inspired to create an art project that glorified the beauty of breast cancer survivors' scars.



Jonathan Bank, MD

The *kintsugi* philosophy underscores beauty in broken things; objects that suffer damage become more beautiful. Taking inspiration from this, Dr. Bank teamed up with leading fashion photographer Erez Sabag and creative director David

Warren, and they set out to capture women's personal victories over cancer through photo essays that interlaced their scars with gold.

Warren says he and Sabag relished the idea of helping cancer survivors feel more beautiful and less ashamed of their bodies.

"There's some shame in our Western culture around imperfection and scarring," Warren says.

WHAT BREAST CANCER TAUGHT ME... LIVING THE ALTERNATIVE

Name: Elaine Ngai

Age: 49

Location: Fresh Meadows, N.Y.

Year of diagnosis: 2017

Cancer diagnosis: DCIS, left breast, Stage 0

What breast reconstruction procedure did you choose: DIEP flap

What did you enjoy the most about the project? I didn't like the idea of being naked, but I agreed because of my devotion to Dr. Bank. He is the best doctor I've ever known in terms of skills and compassion. My favorite part of the project was getting to work with Erez Sabag's entire team. They are all wonderful people who put me at ease and helped bring out a part of me that was needed for the project.

What do you want other women to take away from this project? I want other breast cancer patients to know there's an alternative to implants or a mastectomy alone. I want them to see other women living the alternative, DIEP. When Dr. Bank first mentioned DIEP, I had no way of understanding what the surgery entailed. I couldn't process it. It wasn't until he put me in touch with a previous patient of his who had DIEP flap reconstruction done that I decided to go ahead with it. I want other women to garner courage seeing all different kinds of women going through different stages of breast cancer. I told anyone who would listen to go get themselves checked, because breast cancer can happen to any woman at any age. I'm hoping this project clarifies the DIEP process and helps other women seeking alternatives.

How has Reconstructed impacted your life? I'm so happy with the results. I have returned to my previous life – including Muay Thai martial arts. My self-esteem about my body is even better than it was before the surgery. I feel very grateful to have met Dr. Bank. He was my second opinion. The first opinion did not offer DIEP and instead offered double mastectomy with implants. I did not want implants and almost went with mastectomy alone, which would have been devastating to my self-esteem.

One thing breast cancer can't take away: My sense of humor or my will to be strong for my family and those who have been there for me.

"These women have gone through such physical, emotional and mental trauma during their treatment. They're often heavily scarred at the end of it, and perhaps feel embarrassed. We wanted to photograph the beauty of their scars as symbols of the battle they fought, not only the suffering they endured."

Dr. Bank and his creative team presented the concept to 19 breast cancer survivors. Every patient supported their idea, and 16 women agreed to participate in the project. With participants ready, Reconstructed came to life.

"Beyond the obvious commonality, they all crumbled in tears upon viewing the *kintsugi* video, and all felt empowered after seeing our proposition for Reconstructed," Dr. Bank says. "Moreover, they all share the same determination to use this opportunity not only to help themselves come full circle, but to help other women who are faced with the diagnosis and give them hope and fortitude on their journey to survivorship."

DIPPED IN GOLD

Reconstructed is a series of photographs about women of differing ages, races, professions and socioeconomic backgrounds who have undergone various types of breast reconstruction surgery – and have the scars to prove it. The raw and emotional images depict women reclaiming their identity and femininity after going through cancer treatment.

Sought-after hair stylists and makeup artists in the beauty industry volunteered their time for the project's photo and video shoots. Warren says every woman showed enormous bravery as they bared their scars and naked bodies on camera. Some women were completely covered in gold glitter, while others had their entire bodies splattered in gold paint. Warren notes every gold-painted scar was photographed precisely.

"It's not just a random picture of

a tummy with a scar on it," Warren explains. "We tried to create in true *kintsugi* spirit to represent the beauty because of their journey. We used the personality of each woman. We pushed them, but we were respectful about not pushing them too far. It takes a brave soul to disrobe in front of a team of people they've never met before who want to throw gold all over them. It was definitely a journey to have them become more comfortable with us and for us to get them out of their comfort zone to do something extraordinary they wouldn't do in their daily lives."

Reconstructed walks a fine line between exposing the harsh reality about breast cancer and treatment, and alarming people with the truth, and Dr. Bank says finding the balance between the two was a challenge.

"We are trying to make this impactful to educate women at large about their options for breast reconstruction without sugarcoating breast cancer treatment – whether that includes breast reconstruction or not," he explains. "I don't want to say it's a walk in the park and beautiful. The scars are there – and they come from something – but it's a story that must be told."

"These women are doing this to help themselves and other women through this battle and to encourage women not to be afraid to get a mammogram," Dr. Bank continues. "We want to show that it's scary, but you can survive and have the option of reconstruction if you get diagnosed and treated early. There are ways to overcome it."

Dr. Bank says the project changed his perspective as a plastic surgeon and how he approaches his work.

"There's an expression in surgery that says 'better is the enemy of good,' yet sometimes good is great," he explains. "I constantly scrutinized my post-op photos and beat myself up for little or large imperfections in my outcomes, but then you look at these pictures from Reconstructed, and they are much more dynamic. None of

Name: Donna LoNigro

Age: 43

Location: Long Island, N.Y.

Year of diagnosis: First diagnosis, 2010; second diagnosis, 2014

Cancer diagnosis: In 2010, I was diagnosed with cancer in my right breast, and in 2014, they found abnormalities in my left breast that they said were precancerous. They told me I would continue dealing with it if I didn't do something. I underwent a double mastectomy and reconstruction right after.

Reconstruction procedure: DIEP flap after failed implant reconstruction

What inspired you to participate in Reconstructed? When Dr. Bank proposed the project, I was hesitant because I didn't want people to see my scars. My mother is also a breast cancer survivor, and she told me the scar is not horrible. It's a scar. My sister and husband told me the same. It was overwhelming, exciting and scary. I feel so much better that I did it.

How has Reconstructed impacted your life? I'm no longer insecure with my body. I don't hide my scars anymore. It's the new me.

What do you want other women to take away? I want women to know that they're beautiful no matter what their body looks like. It's you and that's what makes you unique. I don't think I would be who I am now unless I went through what I went through. I want women to know getting a breast cancer diagnosis is not the end. It's not a death notice. There's so much more they can do for you. These surgeons did so much for me. I'm cut up, but I'm whole. I had to be stitched up to be me again. Everyone is beautiful in their own way.

One thing breast cancer can't take away: My life. It's not going to take me away. I have to be here for my family – for my husband and my boys. I will fight tooth and nail for them. I won't let cancer win.

WHAT BREAST CANCER TAUGHT ME...
WON'T LET CANCER WIN



WHAT BREAST CANCER TAUGHT ME...
CELEBRATION OF LIFE**Name:** Margaret Donohue**Age:** 39**Location:** Queens, N.Y.**Year of diagnosis:** 2015**Cancer diagnosis:** Lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS)**Reconstruction procedure:** Direct-to-implant post-mastectomy reconstruction and nipple reconstruction. I chose this procedure instead of DIEP flap because I still wanted to have a baby.**Why did you participate in Reconstructed?**

I wanted to raise awareness about breast cancer and breast reconstruction. I think people tend to focus on the negative part of reconstruction, but breast reconstruction really helped me physically and emotionally. My mom had a mastectomy when I was younger and died from breast cancer. She didn't have the chance to have reconstruction – in the early 1980s, it wasn't covered by insurance or really talked about. I felt very lucky to have the opportunity. When making the decision about the mastectomy, I knew insurance would cover my reconstruction and that helped with my decision. The concept of the project is very beautiful.

What do you want other women to take away from this project? Hopefully, other women who are contemplating on having a mastectomy – whether by choice or necessity – will feel a little less scared. I hope it helps them feel beautiful. I also hope younger women become more aware of breast cancer. Even with my family history, I didn't think it would be an issue at this age. I have friends who put off their mammograms, but it's important to keep up with your screenings because you can prevent things if you catch it earlier. The only reason they caught mine is because I went in for a fertility treatment and they ran a test. I feel lucky they caught it early and I could choose what I wanted to do for my future.

What have you learned during your cancer journey? Dealing with infertility and breast cancer can make it difficult to decide what to do. I was going through fertility treatments when they discovered I had cancer, and they put them on hold until my cancer treatment ended. It took a while, but I eventually got pregnant after my reconstruction and it was a celebration. It's important for younger women who are dealing with infertility issues and cancer to know it is still possible to have a baby after cancer.

One thing breast cancer can't take away: Love. The entire process shows you the people in your life who love you and care for you. It puts things in perspective, and you realize what's important. Even during the bad times after the surgery, love is what got me through all of it.

them are perfectly symmetrical, and they're all beautiful in their own way. The women in them feel alive again, beautiful again and wanted again."

"Taking these women who have been through a lot and making them feel like top models for a day was really transformative for them," he adds. "More people should embrace imperfections. Whether a surgeon or a patient, we shouldn't beat ourselves up for not being perfect."

BEAUTY ON DISPLAY

Although Warren and Sabag have collaborated on numerous beauty campaigns for more than 20 years, Warren says Reconstructed is unlike anything they've done before.

"A lot of the campaigns we photograph don't have such compassionate beginnings," he says. "We created a beautifully designed coffee-table book with extraordinary images that we're immensely proud of, but it's bigger than that. If a woman picks up this book in a doctor's office and thinks, 'Wow, these women did this, and I can be OK,' that would be fantastic. Even though women may fear how their bodies will look after breast reconstruction, we want to show they are beautiful and there is nothing to be ashamed of."

Reconstructed has expanded into 18 video interviews of the survivors, a 120-page, high-quality coffee-table book and an art exhibition in multiple venues. The website and app (currently under construction at press time) will feature the project's video interviews with plans to expand the platform and give other breast cancer survivors an opportunity to share their stories.

Reconstructed is slated to appear at a New York Fashion Week event in September. International exhibits are scheduled for November at the Tel Aviv Museum during the 44th Convention of the Israeli Society of Plastic and Aesthetic Surgery, followed by a two-week gallery exhibit

Name: Katica Ulysse

Age: 56

Location: Hempstead, N.Y.

Year of diagnosis: 2017

Cancer diagnosis: Left-sided breast cancer

Reconstruction procedure: Left mastectomy with immediate autologous tissue reconstruction

What inspired you to participate in Reconstructed?

I joined because everyone treated me like I mattered. From the first day I met Dr. Bank, he didn't have pity for me. He had compassion and understanding, and he explained everything to me. He also told my husband he wasn't alone, and he was going to be there for any questions or concerns we had. You don't find that these days. When I go to the office, Dr. Bank always has a smile on his face and a kind word of encouragement. I was blessed that God sent me there. He's a great plastic surgeon. He has a good heart. I love the job he did.

What do you want other women to take away from Reconstructed?

It's not always bad. I want them to see they can still look beautiful after all the tragedy and be the women they were before cancer. That's what I thought about when I had my breast removed.

One thing breast cancer can't take away: My faith in God. It also can't take away my strength and love for life.

I have been through so much and giving up was never God's plan for me before cancer and certainly not now. I believe I have a mission in this life to do something great. I'm not done yet. God is not finished with me yet, and with His grace, I will continue to be grateful for every day and happy for big and small favors.


WHAT BREAST CANCER TAUGHT ME...
NEVER GIVING UP



in Tel Aviv. Reconstructed will also appear at Plastic Surgery The Meeting 2018 in Chicago in September. Dr. Bank says limited edition gold-treated prints and high-quality coffee-table books will be sold at the annual meeting and upcoming gallery events.

"We have an opportunity to make this project impactful – and not just for the one in eight women who are touched by breast cancer," Dr. Bank says. "We can take inspiration from the *kintsugi* philosophy and push what it means to paint women in gold; some filled with fine lines, some with huge brush strokes, dripping and splashing body paint, and gold light projections.

"Ultimately, Reconstructed is not about breast cancer, but about love,

compassion, hope and understanding," he adds. "The images glorify the beauty of the inspiring women who wear the scars that connect and strengthen all of us." 

Dr. Bank works with New York Breast Reconstruction Associates, a group of ASPS member surgeons committed to optimizing breast reconstruction outcomes and quality of care for women facing mastectomy.



Reconstructed's photographer Erez Sabag (left) and creative director David Warren (right) bring Dr. Bank's vision to life.

To purchase your copy of Reconstructed, visit shopasps.org or projectreconstructed.org. Proceeds will be directed to The PSF and the American Cancer Society for breast cancer research.