

## IN THE THICK OF IT

## Stand-up becomes inspirational

**DIANE FLACKS**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Marla Lukofsky spent three decades in the harsh world of stand-up comedy. She worked in every major city in Canada and the United States as well as in Europe. She was ubiquitous on TV and radio. One of her signature routines was performing the entire *Wizard of Oz*, with songs, in one minute. She's had a great run.

In a Toronto café, Lukofsky and I, members of the 5-foot-3-and-under club, look like overdressed children, swallowed up by the deep, stylish armchairs. When she's excited about a topic, she literally pops up out of her chair. She's a captivating and heartbreaking storyteller — with the lightning-quick comic timing of a mercilessly cutting stand-up and the expansive narrative tug of a raconteur.

She tells me that by 1998, she was living in L.A., “single but okay with it. My career had floundered but I didn't feel rejected. I loved my job at an organic food market and my boss loved me. And then, one night, I found a lump in my breast. I admit that I thought, ‘Well, if I have to go, let me go now. I'm at peace.’”

Lukofsky found the lump “while doing what any popular single girl would do on a Saturday night — my laundry. My breast slipped out of the armhole of my undershirt, so I pulled it back in. . . .” She mimes rolling up a lo-o-o-ng rope (later, when asked to describe her breasts she says, “They're long.”)

Lukofsky sips her latte and continues. “. . . and then I felt a lump. I'd just had a clear mammogram. Actually, many cancer survivors I spoke with had clear mammograms. . . .” She focuses on me intently, making sure I'm transcribing this. “. . . Always get a second opinion, trust your instincts and do self-exams!”

Satisfied, she continues.

“My GP asked for another mam-



mogram. So they squeezed my breast into one of those panini-maker mammogram machines. . . .”

The mammogram was clear, but the technician was still concerned, so a biopsy was ordered. Lukofsky was told she'd have to wait a few hours for it, so she headed to her car in the parking lot of Cedars-Sinai hospital in L.A. All of a sudden, she saw her nurse running after her, calling “Miss Lukofsky, Miss Lukofsky, we can do your biopsy now.”

Lukofsky jokes: “I couldn't believe it! She got my name right! I thought to myself, ‘I like this place.’”

But there was nothing funny about chemotherapy. She recalls one day in particular. She had lost all her hair and had sunk to the sidewalk outside a drugstore while she waited for her anti-nausea pre-

scription to be ready. She felt exposed. Anyone who looked at her would know she was going through chemo.

A family of Baptists approached her and asked if they could pray for her. Lukofsky warned them, “I'm a Jewish agnostic. But if you wanna pray, go ahead. Couldn't hurt.” They held her hands while she sat with her head between her knees.

She is grateful for the kindness of strangers and unexpected dedication of friends. She especially credits her mother for repeatedly saying to her, “Marla, you're stronger than you think.”

In 1999, after four brutal rounds of chemo and daily radiation, she returned home to Toronto to recover and reinvent herself. Instead, she ended up undertaking the most important gig of her life. Her father

died unexpectedly in 2004 and a year to that day, her mother was diagnosed with leukemia and died eight months later, in 2006. “Taking care of my parents was my most important job — and it's a temporary job.”

Lukofsky was able to prepare her father's body for burial and dress her mother in a burial shroud. She was able to advocate for her mother in her cancer treatment, to provide inside information and to flag danger signs. Most crucially to Lukofsky, she was able to say, “Mommy, I'm here. You can let go.”

Eight months after her mother died, Lukofsky broke her leg in three places and was stuck in her house for three months. In that time, she was forced to close down a fledgling sales business she had started. Trapped, she rewrote the



Ever the comedian, Marla Lukofsky, left, compares herself to a turtle — and welcomes the nickname Turtlehead — during treatment for breast cancer in 1998. Above, her promo shot was taken a few months earlier, when she was doing stand-up in Los Angeles.

memoirs of her cancer time.

A year ago, a friend put her on the roster of the Outstanding Women's Speakers Bureau. She soon got a booking to do a speech that she hadn't yet written. She did have a title though: “I'm Still Here. . . . And So is My Hair.”

Her speech, which she has since performed at Gilda's House in Toronto, among other venues across Canada, is in equal parts funny, brutally honest and heart-rending. She aims to “make people feel understood. That's precious to me. I don't preach the harshest thing. I simply tell people that they should listen to each other. And it is fun! People say to me, ‘You're back. The Marla we haven't seen in years.’”

Lukofsky poings out of her seat again. “I am. I feel alive!”

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