

Alabama comedian says laughter is good medicine, especially for breast cancer survivors

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Carla "The Truth" Youngblood is a Birmingham comedian and breast cancer survivor. In October, for National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, she tells her story in a show called "The Truth About Breast Cancer."

(Courtesy photos)

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What's so funny about breast cancer? [Carla Youngblood](#) can tell you. And after just a few minutes, we bet she'll have you laughing.

That's just her way. Her mission. And her job description, as a comedian whose stage name is "The Truth."

The Birmingham native, 51, is a breast cancer survivor who regards humor as a healing force, as well as a builder of community. For these reasons, Youngblood doesn't shy away from joking about a very serious subject, telling her own story of illness and recovery during her shows.

"It's important to laugh about breast cancer," says Youngblood, who was diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer, an aggressive form of the disease, in 2015. "First off, if you can't laugh at yourself, you're in trouble. Second, if you're laughing, it's like you're crying at the same time. And third, my goal is to get a different thought out there, letting people know there's still life -- before, during and after breast cancer."

In her comedy routines, Youngblood aims to create common ground, reaching out to others who've been diagnosed with breast cancer and letting them know they're not alone. She conveys a message of hope -- "I got through this, and you can, too" -- while poking fun at some aspects of the journey.

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"I don't think another comedian, who isn't a survivor, could talk about it," Youngblood says. "But when you go through it, people who've gone through it can relate to you."

In fact, some of her material was created and tested on the spot, during chemotherapy sessions (Youngblood had 16 rounds), radiation treatments (she's had 28 of those) and countless doctor visits. This approach came naturally to her, Youngblood says, and made the ordeal easier.

"After about three or four treatments of chemotherapy, I started observing things to see what was unique or funny," Youngblood says. "I started joking with the nurses. I started joking with the other patients. I saw so much hurt and pain. I started making light of it, and people started laughing."

Over the past couple of years, Youngblood has polished her material, added to her repertoire and deepened her insights on breast cancer. Best of all, people are still laughing, as she performs at comedy clubs, for women's groups and at events sponsored by churches and community organizations.

"It's amazing to me how much material I have on breast cancer, and how much new material comes to me," Youngblood says. "The only things I won't say about breast cancer are judgmental calls on what people do. I talk about my own situation, and I try to give an encouraging word. We've come so far (with health care), and there are so many survivors now."

Although her usual comedy set doesn't focus exclusively on breast cancer, Youngblood says she always takes the opportunity to identify herself as a survivor and give testimony to the audience. Then, in October, her platform expands significantly -- Youngblood becomes even more of a woman on a mission -- for [National Breast Cancer Awareness Month](#).

That's when she performs a show called "The Truth about Breast Cancer," detailing a yearlong experience that tested her mettle, leaving Youngblood convinced that a positive outlook makes a difference.

"In my mind, I told myself that I could have those (negative) thoughts and moments, but it wasn't going to change anything," Youngblood says. "It was just, like, 'Let's go and do this.'"

In many cases, a woman will become alerted to breast cancer after discovering a lump that leads to testing and diagnosis by a physician. Youngblood's case was different. She says she began to experience chest pain in October 2015, typically at bedtime, and went to a doctor for help.

Initially, the doctor said nothing was wrong, Youngblood says, but tests later revealed that breast cancer was the culprit.

"Mine wasn't necessarily a lump; it was a fullness," Youngblood says. "The actual lump had broken. But when I first felt something, it was almost as if I knew it. It wasn't a shock. I was mentally prepared for it, as much as you can be."

Her treatment plan included chemotherapy from November 2015 through March 2016, a double mastectomy in May 2016 and radiation for three months, starting in July 2016. Side effects from chemotherapy are commonplace, ranging from nausea to fatigue to "chemo brain," but Youngblood experienced few of these.

"I didn't get sick one day," she says. "I ate before treatment, during treatment and after treatment. I ate every day and never did get sick. I did lose my hair. When I noticed my hair was coming out, I cut it all off. I did a video and put it on Facebook."

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To the sounds of Janet Jackson's "Control," Youngblood's head was shaved on camera in December 2015. At the start of the clip, she told potential viewers that her motivation was to take charge of her cancer, to have a sense of control. ("It was not going to control me, starting with my hair," she said.)

Youngblood posted video updates when she completed chemotherapy, and after her successful surgery. In all three videos, her mood is matter-of-fact, upbeat, almost jubilant. ("Rejoicing because God is so good to me," she said.)

Youngblood's strong religious faith was a pillar of support during the experience, along with the comforting presence of family and friends. Her medical team was crucial, of course -- Youngblood gives props to her surgeon, oncologist, radiologist and more -- but their expertise was bolstered by an ample dose of self-help.

Early on, Youngblood says, she realized that a cancer diagnosis seems less intimidating -- less frightening, less crushing and less alienating -- if you simply talk about it.

"Cancer is a scary and tricky subject," she says. "People around me didn't know what to say or how to look at me. But make a joke and you have a conversation."

Ask Youngblood if she considers herself a brave person, facing adversity with a grin, and she'll tell you that "determined" is a more accurate term. Her go-to advice for women who've been diagnosed with breast cancer reflects that purposeful philosophy.

"First off, avoid the negative," Youngblood says. "Deal with the process every day, but focus on the outcome."

To help others combat fear when breast cancer strikes, Youngblood has become an advocate at the [Forge Breast Cancer Survivor Center](#) in Birmingham. In this volunteer role, she offers information, support and guidance to women as they go through the process of diagnosis, medical appointments and treatment.

"It's like a sister-to-sister partnership to help somebody," Youngblood says. "They assign someone to me as a person who's going through breast cancer. I go to the doctor's office with them and take notes, so they can remember everything the doctor says and not be overwhelmed. I write it all down, go over it with them and ask if they have questions. ... Most people just need somebody to listen."

As you might expect, Youngblood also has a bunch of humorous anecdotes at her disposal, and she'll toss these into the conversation when it's appropriate. There was that time during her chemotherapy phase, for example, when her hat and scarf started to slip in the middle of a comedy show.

Instead of fretting about it, Youngblood simply grabbed the pesky items and threw them into the crowd, placing her bald head in the spotlight. ("I thought, 'Oh, well, it's live,'" she says.)

These days, Youngblood proudly wears a T-shirt that proclaims, "'The Truth' Is I'm Cured!" and her concert attire for October leans to vivid pink. Breast cancer survivors are members of a sisterhood, Youngblood says, and she's standing firm among them.

"My goal is to figure out a way to reach out to more women's groups and organizations," Youngblood says. "I want to give them the light of hope and an encouraging word. I enjoy being able to go out and put a smile on somebody's face."