



love LETTERS

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HARNESSING THE ALLURE OF THESE LETTERS, GINA FOUNDED GIRLS LOVE MAIL, A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION THAT GIVES THE GIFT OF HANDWRITTEN NOTES TO NEWLY DIAGNOSED BREAST CANCER PATIENTS.

When it comes to handwritten letters, I have always been of the hopeless romantic variety. For years now, I have held onto a stack of old letters sent by former coworkers and faraway friends, as though the meaning behind the words in each note carried a little more weight simply because the person put pen to paper to tell the story within their heart. Award-winning author Gina Mulligan has a similar outlook on the power of handwritten letters, which is why I felt an immediate kinship to her when we sat down to discuss her nonprofit, Girls Love Mail.

"It is such an expressive form of communication," Gina describes. "Because they are handwritten, because they are emotional, we save them. Along with the personal message, there is that one-to-one connection that draws people to writing and receiving letters. When you sit down to handwrite a letter, you really have to pay attention to every word. You don't want to make a mistake and start over. Handwritten letters have such a gracious feel that we don't have anymore. In our age of text messaging and e-mailing, we have forgotten how powerful something that is handwritten can be."

Harnessing the allure of these letters, Gina founded Girls Love Mail, a nonprofit organization that gives the gift of handwritten notes to newly diagnosed breast cancer patients. These letters are written by people all across the world—whether they be fellow breast cancer survivors sharing their personal experiences, people who've had loved ones affected by the disease passing along words of encouragement, or the empathetic masses who are paying forward the feel-good vibe by mailing messages of hope. With help from volunteers, Gina puts each one into a special Girls Love Mail envelope and bundles them for breast cancer centers across the nation, where nurse navigators then hand out the individual letters to

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newly diagnosed patients. “After working for five years on a novel comprised entirely of letters, I felt connected to what I consider the lost art of letter writing,” recalls Gina. “However, not until I was diagnosed with breast cancer did I understand that a few words on paper are more than just a keepsake. A handwritten letter is a gift with the ultimate power to heal.”

The inspiration behind Girls Love Mail was directly triggered by the messages Gina received during her own battle. “Having just turned forty and in the throes of writing my novel, being told I had cancer in February 2009 was a shock. But it wasn’t the day of my diagnosis that changed my life. The true change came a few weeks later, when I started receiving well wishes from strangers,” she remembers. “It was surreal. I received over 200 letters and cards, mostly from people I had never met before—people from my husband’s church, or a friend of a friend who had heard about my situation in passing. It was really very random, and the word spread on its own. But I feel like it was meant to be in some respects. It meant so much that people we didn’t know were taking the time to reach out. I felt like family and friends had to send me something, but these people I didn’t know didn’t have to do anything, and here they had taken time to write me a card. That is what made it so special.”

“One of the things that struck me as I went through treatment was the fact that the

process was so isolating. I felt really alone,” Gina continues. “I know 250,000 people get diagnosed with breast cancer each year, but when you are alone in the room for radiation, you feel very isolated. So to get that tangible card that says, ‘You are not alone. I am thinking of you,’ meant a tremendous amount to me. And there were also people who shared messages about their own experiences, giving me some guidance: ‘I have been through this. This is what happened.’ Both of these messages worked for me. I set them up on my table, and I read them after radiation. It was just such a warm experience.”

Gina wanted to pay it forward in order to help give other women the same support system, so she set out in August 2011 with the goal of getting handwritten cards and letters into the hands of every newly diagnosed woman with breast cancer. “When you are newly diagnosed, you are unsure of how treatment is going to be and what is going to happen next. You usually meet one-on-one with someone to discuss options, where you receive this big binder of information about treatments and other scary subjects,” Gina details. “Once you get involved in a treatment, it becomes a little easier to move forward. But that early stage is really critical. I approached local breast cancer centers to see about putting a handwritten letter in the binder, so along with this scary information, women would also receive a handwritten note saying, ‘You can do this. You are going to be okay.’”

With full support from her local cancer centers, Gina began collecting letters from friends and family, and by October, they already had collected several thousand letters. “My friends and I wrote letters early on, but a month or so into it, we were getting letters from people in the community. The concept behind Girls Love Mail really resonated with people, and it just took on a life of its own,” explains Gina, whose background in marketing aided her in setting up brochures and a website to help get the word out and generate press coverage. “Since we can’t mail the letters directly to recipients due to patient confidentiality, we started working with breast cancer centers, who would then hand them out, and it took off from there. It sounds strange to say, but I really didn’t do anything amazing. It was just an idea that took off and filled a need for people. I think that is why it worked.”

And worked it did! Handwritten letters are now being sent to more than 115 breast cancer centers across the nation. The letters themselves range from your basic pen-to-paper notes on looseleaf stationery to a collaboration of artistic greeting cards, but they all share the same inspirational sentiment. “These recipients have just been diagnosed with a serious illness, so their state of mind isn’t your everyday state of mind; we are really serious in making sure the letters communicate a general guideline that everyone could find encouraging. The letters are beautiful. People do a wonderful

job,” Gina adds, as she reviews every letter with the help of twelve volunteers, before sending them to the cancer centers.

With letters coming in from all over the world, the demographics of the writers run the gamut. “Last October was a great month since it’s National Breast Cancer Awareness Month,” the founder reflects. “I remember just opening up the mail one day, and seeing that we received letters from a sorority, a girl scouts troop, a classroom, an old-age retirement facility, and a book club. In that one day, we got letters from people in every age group! But one of the best bulk letter deliveries so far was from a group of Japanese students in Japan, who wrote letters for us in Spanish.”

Operating Girls Love Mail solely off of small grants and one corporate sponsorship, Gina continues to focus her attention toward achieving her original goal: to get a letter into the hands of every woman in the United States who is diagnosed each year. “After watching our numbers grow over the past year, it is totally doable,” assures Gina, as she notes that many of the Girls Love Mail letter writers are repeat senders. “In general, we encourage people to do their monthly self-exam, and when you don’t find a lump, write a note to someone who did. We’ve found that once people write one, they feel empowered and enjoy the process. We even have one woman who has written over 1,000 letters herself!”

For the recipients of these letters, however, it doesn’t matter how many letters are out there, who writes them, or where they originate from—just reading their individual heartfelt message of support and generosity from a stranger is enough to turn their day around. As Peggy Konkol, a Girls Love Mail recipient, describes, “I was given my Girls Love Mail letter through the breast cancer support group that I attend at Sharp Chula Vista in California. The letter



touched my heart in a way that was very, very special. The sweet words of the child that wrote the note reminded me of the struggles I faced and the realization that I fought, and won. Every woman/girl has that warrior spirit within, and we can fight.”

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