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Making Lemons into Champagne

BY KATHY LATOUR

On October 15, 2006, I celebrated a significant cancer milestone: 20 years of survivorship. Cancer survivors celebrate in unusual ways, such as the friend who demanded a new bathroom after having spent a good portion of the year on that floor. Others have wild parties that involve risky things like bungee jumping to prove they are alive. I took care of risky behavior at my 15-year anniversary when, at age 50, I got my motorcycle license and later rode more than 2,000 miles to raise funds for breast cancer.

For my 20th year, I celebrated in two different ways. First I wanted a constant reminder—something tangible—like a ring. Not having worn a ring since my divorce in 2000, I wanted something for my right hand with exactly 20 diamonds. My Internet and shopping searches were a challenge. The diamonds were either too small or too big. Face it, 20 quarter-karat diamonds is a lot of ice.

Then I walked into Arman's, a small jewelry store near Southern Methodist University in Dallas, where I teach. There it was—a ball of diamonds—and it looked like about 20. Arman, the jeweler, had designed it himself. I held the ring, turning it over and over, trying to count the diamonds. Finally, Arman took the ring and counted with his jeweler's loop as I explained the crazy request. When he looked up and said "25," I knew it wasn't my ring after all.

Arman called two days later and asked me to come in. When I arrived, he handed me a beautiful ring in my size that looked just like the first one and explained that because he designed the ring, he knew how to take five diamonds out without it showing. It was beautiful, and then Arman said something that made me know it was my ring. "In five years," he said softly, "we'll just put the diamonds back on." Needless to say, that ring went home with me that day.

As significant as the ring was, my daughter Kirtley's 21st birthday on September 27 was more important. In fact it had been at her one-year, well-baby checkup that I showed the suspicious lump to my doctor. I had originally thought about a girlfriend trip to New York City for my 20th to celebrate with my best friends and Kirtley, who attends college there. But such a trip didn't work out. On the phone, Kirtley and I bemoaned the fact that we would not celebrate her special day together.

Compelled to be with my child, who I thought I would never see start preschool, I caught the last flight from Dallas on September 26, arriving at her doorstep at close to midnight. I called her cell phone to repeat our sad conversation about not being together. "You know," I said. "I think if you wished really, really hard I would be on your doorstep."

She opened her front door and flew into my arms. “You’re here, you’re here,” she kept saying. “Yes,” I said. “I’m here.”