

# Cooperative Funeral Fund Inc.

## My Genes Fit Me - Part 1

as seen in:



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# Viewpoint

By Ann Marie St. George

# My Genes

## Fit Me Part One

You remember that exact moment when someone told you something and you truly hoped it was an April Fool's joke? It happened to me on Halloween this past year while I stood in front of our booth in the middle of the National Funeral Directors Association convention hall in Boston.

As I waited patiently to run into anyone that would like to hear more information about our company, my phone rang. Not recognizing the number but realizing it was in my sales area, I answered with all the wit and charm I could muster. "Hello, this is Ann Marie."

"Ann Marie?"

"Yes, this is Ann Marie."

"This is Laura the genetic counselor from Elizabeth Wende Breast Care, do you have a moment to talk?"

Being in sales mode and not fully comprehending who was on the other end of the phone, I responded, "Absolutely, how can I help you?"

"Well, I have some bad news ... you tested positive for the BRCA1 gene mutation."

At that moment, all I heard were crickets as I looked around the convention floor – not sure what exactly this meant but somehow realizing I hadn't just won the lottery.

As many of you who have read my articles know, I like to use humor, sarcasm, and heart-string pulling to make my point, and this one is no different. I just want to preface it by saying I am not making light of what myself and others who are BRCA1 positive are going through. I am just sharing my personal journey.

How many times have you heard the expression, "You can pick your friends, but you can't pick your family?" Guess what, we can't pick our family genes either. That, my friends, is chosen for us. For me it consists of a few recessive traits like red hair and blue eyes (unlike my brother who got the recessive trifecta: red hair, blue eyes and left-handedness). I am proud to be of German, Irish and Scottish descent, while my husband is proud of his Sicilian, Scottish and German decent despite that he will only admit to the Sicilian part (eye roll please).

A thirst for answers brought us to Ancestry.com, and we found ourselves taking an Ancestry DNA test. Yes, we are quite a bit more mixed than we ever anticipated. I found I was an even bigger mutt than what I had previously thought, but alas, I was correct in thinking I am mostly Irish Wolfhound ... hee hee.

In searching from whence I came, I started to see a pattern of family cancer. I had a compelling feeling that I was the perfect candidate for cancer-specific genetic testing (although personally, I would rather be a candidate for the first funeral director in space).

This quest brought me to a local doctor who also saw the pattern and submitted the information to the genetic testing offices of Elizabeth Wende Breast Care in Rochester, New York. There is a specific protocol to qualify for testing, and apparently, I met the protocol (yippee for me). Which brings

me back to my not-so-festive Halloween day 2017, when I was told I was BRCA1 positive.

Okay, so what the heck does it mean to have a deleterious mutation in the BRCA1 gene (pronounced BRACA one) – or more simply be told you are BRCA1 positive? Please tell me why anyone would think it is a fantastic idea to Google everything there is to know about BRCA1 before speaking to the professionals ... I mean, there is no way it would ever be stressful and/or make you feel like your little world just imploded upon you, right?!

Especially since – lest I forgot to mention – BRCA is short for breast cancer. So, for the sake of a simple explanation here is the definition of the BRCA1 gene mutation in my own words: The gene that fights breast cancer, ovarian cancer, pancreatic cancer and prostate cancer does not work, making my risk to having any of these cancers (except prostate of course) a great deal higher than the general population. For example, my lifetime risk of breast cancer is 85 percent and ovarian cancer is 45 percent, and so far, at the age of 54, I have dodged a major bullet because I have had neither of these two cancers nor any other cancer for that matter. Luckily, yes, I said luckily, I only have a gene that tells me I am at a high risk of ending up with either breast or ovarian cancer; the lucky part is that I don't actually have these cancers, for now.

At this point, you might say, "Holy crap. What are you supposed to do?"

You may have used a different phrase, but you get the drift. My options range from simple extra screenings to major surgeries – decisions that cannot be made lightly. Boiled down, they are:

1. Screenings that "should" allow for early detection, but then if these screenings ever detected cancer, I would still have to go through cancer treatments like radiation and chemotherapy, not something I would ever look forward to doing.

2. Chemoprevention therapies – drugs given to help reduce breast cancer. Just hearing the word

"chemo," I knew this option was not an option for me.

3. Prophylactic preventative surgeries – this is the most drastic and most preventative option. The extreme options in this case being a dual mastectomy along with a full hysterectomy ... can I get an ouch!

Even with the BRCA1 gene, there is a chance that I may never get cancer in the first place. But I cannot shake the feeling I am playing Russian roulette with my life.

What I am most fortunate for is my husband, who handled these circumstances with all his quiet introspection, reminding me that I do not have cancer, reminding me that I was given an opportunity to prevent cancer from ever happening and well, I would get that boob job I've always wanted. Hmm, I hadn't thought of that last one ... or maybe I had (lol). Using humor to relieve stress has always been my go-to, and now I will lean on my quick wit to make the tough decisions I need to in order to move forward.

After a ton of research, soul searching and a few glasses of red wine, I decided the best option for me was the dual mastectomy with reconstruction along with a full hysterectomy – thereby putting my risk of breast, ovarian and uterine cancers well below the average persons. Some of you may think my decision was a no-brainer while others may think I am absolutely bonkers. All I know is I need to do what is right for me and those I love. I appreciate any good vibes sent my way as this phase of my life's journey continues, and thank you so much for letting me share my story.

In a future issue, I promise to continue to give you my perspective on being BRCA1 positive as I select my doctors and schedule my surgeries. After all, I cannot deny "my genes fit me" even though my other jeans don't. You gotta love menopause ... double ugh! •

*If any of you have any questions, please email me at [mygenesfitme@gmail.com](mailto:mygenesfitme@gmail.com).*

## Allowing You To Confidently



## Manage Your Preneed Program

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