

"All our dreams have come true!"

A wedding is often the beginning of a couple's life together. But for Melissa Zannis Childs and her groom, Jeff, theirs was a celebration of the challenges they'd already overcome—and proof of just how powerful love can be. Their story will touch your heart!

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Just days before turning 31, Melissa Zannis should've been making plans with her boyfriend to celebrate her birthday. Instead, Jeff was holding her as the phone in her hand shook.

"I'm sorry," her doctor said. "It is cancer . . ."

A few weeks earlier, Melissa had been watching TV when her hand rushed against her left breast. There was something there, hard as a pebble. But it can't be anything to worry about, the Denver woman told herself. She didn't feel sick. She didn't even have a family history of breast cancer.

"It was like being handed a death sentence," Melissa recalls. "All I could think was, 'I'm not ready for this.'"

To lessen the chance of recurrence, Melissa opted for a double mastectomy. But as the bandages were removed, she stared at the flat plane where her breasts used to be and her heart caught.

Ever since she'd met Jeff, they'd been inseparable. She even daydreamed about getting married someday. Yet they were only a year to their relationship. They were supposed to be having fun. They were supposed to have all the time in the world. How could I have found the man of my dreams and have it end like *this*?

A surprising love

At her first chemotherapy treatment, Melissa grabbed a pen from her purse.

Everything is going to be fine!! she scrawled on her arm, making a happy smiley face beneath the exclamation points.

She was the one who the IVs were dripping into, she told herself. She'd get herself through it.

But Jeff insisted on coming.

"Sing with me," he'd say, launching into Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" to make Melissa smile.

When her hair began falling out, Melissa sighed. "I look like an army boy."

"I think you look like a futuristic vixen," Jeff winked.

There were dark moments. Moments when Melissa didn't have the strength to make it into the shower. When she cried from pain, from fear. But through it all, Jeff was there.

At her last chemo treatment, Melissa wore a T-shirt that read "Rock Star Survivor." Soon after, Jeff packed a picnic. And, at the peak of Breckenridge Mountain, he got down on one knee and asked, "Will you marry me?"

Melissa looked at this man who had stayed when others might have run. Who'd kissed her scars. Who was the reason she'd fought so hard.



"Love truly can conquer all!" says Melissa, with Jeff and Cheryl (center), who helped give them their dream wedding.

"Yes!" she whispered through tears.

Meanwhile, across the city, wedding photographer Cheryl Ungar was searching for a way to make a difference.

Twenty years ago, she had been diagnosed with breast cancer at just 30. She'd never forgotten the tell-it-had-taken-or-leave-it isolation it had been to be the only young woman in the chemo room.

Still, Cheryl felt fortunate. It wasn't that cancer wasn't always in the back of her mind; that she didn't sometimes worry about recurrence. But she didn't want anyone to define her as "that girl with cancer." She wanted her life to have purpose.

She loved capturing those little moments of a couple's special day—how the bride never felt more beautiful; that sense of hope in the air. And it struck Cheryl: Why not offer a bride who'd been affected by breast cancer the wedding of her dreams?

So, contacting other vendors to help, she organized The Wedding Pink (CherylUngarGives.com). Then she waited . . .

Love and miracles

One day at work, Melissa happened to log on to find an e-mail about The Wedding Pink—and her eyes widened.

With all her medical bills, an opportunity like this would really help. So she entered, writing: *Even if I am not the winner of this amazing prize, I would like to say "thank you" on behalf of all cancer survivors!*

When Cheryl read Melissa's story, tears sprang to her eyes. She saw herself in Melissa, who'd been the same age when she was diagnosed. And she was touched by Jeff's courage—so many young men would've bolted.

But this . . . *this* was what true love is all about.

"Thank you!" Melissa marveled when she received the remarkable news. And she couldn't believe that as blessed as she already was—to have Jeff; to have *survived*—she was receiving this extraordinary gift, too.

So one Sunday this past spring, as more than 100 family and friends gathered, Melissa walked down the aisle. "Today, I marry my best friend," she vowed through tears.

Today, Melissa remains cancer-free. She and Jeff laugh as they watch their playful striped kittens, Rigby and Lucy, chase each other through the house, hoping someday they'll be doing the same with their children. And they remain so touched by Cheryl's gift that they've joined The Wedding Pink board to throw a wedding next year for another couple whose lives have been changed by cancer.

"I don't think I really understood love until I was diagnosed with cancer. But now all our dreams are coming true!" Melissa beams. "And I know everyone should always believe that love is all around us!"

—Kristin Higson-Hughes

"Faith makes all things possible. Love makes them easy."

ANONYMOUS

Melissa's tips for living life to the fullest!

Make the most of every day, like Melissa, by . . .

✓ Focusing on the positive!

Every time you worry about something going wrong, stop and list three things that are going right. It'll help you recognize your blessings!

✓ Doing what makes you happy!

Avoid filling your schedule with less-than-fun activities that others suggest—say, going camping if you're not an outdoors person—and do the things that you enjoy!

✓ Giving back!

Find a cause that's close to your heart and volunteer. Whatever you do will make a difference in your community and in your life! "It feels so good to give back," Melissa says.