

Breast cancer survivor uses her journey to spread awareness and hope

By Kendra Applewhite

ASPS strives to recognize remarkable reconstructive surgery patients each year at Plastic Surgery The Meeting during the Patients of Courage: Triumph Over Adversity program, but plastic surgeons encounter and treat courageous patients every day. With that in mind, PSN shares stories of these patient stories throughout the year, while highlighting the breadth of the specialty and the members who help them put their lives back together again.

In 2011, Tamara Sieger discovered a lump in the shower at age 39, just two months after receiving a clear screening mammogram. Additional screening and an MRI confirmed she had stage 2, grade 3 highly aggressive invasive ductal carcinoma, ER+, PR+ and HER2+. She underwent a mastectomy and multiple reconstruction procedures over the course of a decade, with her care led by ASPS member Sumeet Teotia, MD.

Today, Sieger serves as the director of patient services for Alliance in Reconstructive Surgery (AIRS), where she recruits and trains patient advocates and volunteers, develops and manages the patient peer-to-peer mentoring program, as well as partnering with board-certified plastic surgeons and facilities to help reduce fees and provide education, support and hope to women in desperate need. Sieger and Dr. Teotia share their thoughts on her journey and recovery process below.

PSN: Can you tell us what happened after your initial cancer diagnosis?

Tamara Sieger: The biopsy confirmed my fear, and I remember being told, “You have cancer.”

With three tumors, the cancer was considered multi-focal. I immediately began a rigorous six-month treatment of neo-adjuvant chemotherapy, followed by 33 radiation treatments and 52 weeks of targeted Herceptin® therapy. Upon completion of chemotherapy, I underwent a non-optional skin-sparing mastectomy with tissue expanders, latissimus dorsi flap reconstruction followed by surgery for permanent implant exchange, another surgery for nipple reconstruction, a revision surgery – all with Dr. Teotia – and eventually areola tattooing.

After more than a decade with my successful lat-flap breast reconstruction, in February I underwent a complicated microvascular-tissue-based stacked DIEP flap surgery to achieve a more permanent breast reconstruction solution with Dr. Teotia. I’m still healing and will complete my reconstruction in the fall of 2022. Reconstruction is often not typically a “one and done” solution, but I’m thankful for the advancements in reconstruction over the past decade and for the options provided to me.

Like many women diagnosed under the age of 40, I learned that I had dense breast tissue, which made the cancer virtually undetectable on mammogram. Less than a year after my diagnosis, Texas passed H.B. 2012 (Henda’s law), which requires mammography facilities to notify patients and healthcare providers when a patient demonstrates dense breast tissue and could benefit from supplemental screening tests, such as breast MRI. I consider myself extremely fortunate that I discovered my own cancer. When something seemed out of the norm, I took immediate action. Early detection likely saved my life. I’m also grateful that Henda’s law doesn’t allow women to be left in



Tamara Sieger

the dark, as breast density is a strong predictor of the failure of mammography screening to detect breast cancer.

PSN: What was your deciding factor in choosing breast reconstruction?

Sieger: For me, it was never a question. I was fortunate to receive treatment for my breast cancer at UT Southwestern in Dallas. Due to the multidisciplinary approach to treatment, my breast oncologist automatically referred me to the plastic surgery division at UT Southwestern shortly after diagnosis. I know

many patients aren’t fortunate enough to have this level of care and assistance navigating this complicated diagnosis, or finding qualified plastic surgeons.

During the initial consultation, Dr. Teotia provided options for breast reconstruction and involved me in the decision-making process. I distinctly recall him telling me that I likely felt like Humpty Dumpty that had fallen off a wall and was left in pieces, but he would put me back together. He exuded such confidence and kindness, which boosted my confidence. Cancer took so much from me, and there was one way I could restore my sense of femininity and self. I didn’t want to look in the mirror for the rest of my life and be reminded of my diagnosis. I still wanted to feel “normal” and “pretty” and wear the clothes and swimwear I wanted without a constant reminder of a mastectomy without reconstruction. I was determined to have my body restored.

PSN: What were your biggest concerns, and how were they addressed?

Sieger: The biggest concern was whether the outcome would meet my expectations and prove to be worth the sacrifice to undergo several procedures with the inherent risks that come with surgery. These concerns were alleviated by having a compassionate and understanding surgeon who provided options and realistic outcomes. Dr. Teotia listened to me, educated me and answered my many questions. I have supportive and caring family and friends who stayed by my side since Day One and provided the support needed to triumph over this disease, which allowed me time to heal and return stronger than ever.

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Dr. Teotia’s perspective

PSN: What about Tamara’s story do you find particularly inspiring?

Dr. Teotia: Despite all the challenges breast cancer posed to Tamara’s life in all its encompassing aspects, she remained optimistic and forward-thinking about life in a very positive manner.

PSN: How can her story help other patients seeking breast reconstruction after a cancer diagnosis?

Dr. Teotia: Tamara remains steadfast in her approach to life’s challenges. She took her cancer diagnosis, treatment and reconstructive surgical journey at all levels with courage and force that can serve as a guiding example to uplift others.

PSN: Can you describe your experience working with Tamara and providing follow-up care during her cancer journey?

Dr. Teotia: She was positively robust at every level of her surgical process and took recovery by its reins. She had an appropriate and healthy, humorous response to life when things didn’t go perfectly as planned. The ultimate outcome she had was excellent, only bolstered by her enthusiasm about life.

PSN: From your point of view, how has breast reconstruction helped Tamara rebuild her life after cancer?

Dr. Teotia: Tamara has undergone several reconstructive procedures over the years, as she has also changed during and after cancer. Most recently, she underwent a complex double-pedicle conjoined DIEP flap to reverse the long-term effects of previous flap-based surgery performed years ago. She experienced all aspects of reconstructive options such as implants, pedicle flap and ultimately a complex free flap. All those procedures provided her with excellent symmetry at the time of her



Tamara with Dr. Teotia prior to one of her first procedures in 2012.

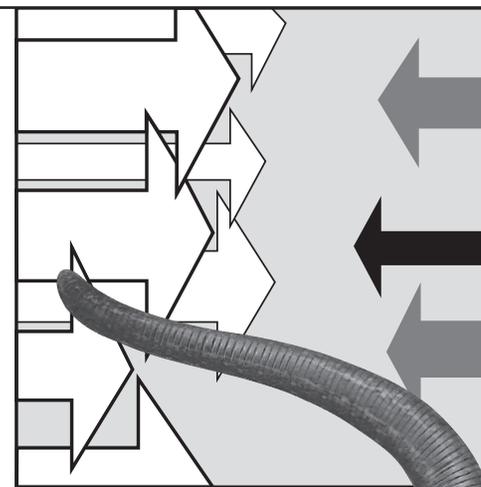
life that fit her personal appearance and the changes a human body goes through over the years. Her willingness to undergo multiple surgeries with excellent artistic outcome at every stage is a testament of her own acknowledgment of how she perceives herself and maintains dignity and pride in living a normal and healthy life after cancer, chemotherapy and radiation.

PSN: Why did you nominate Tamara as a Patient of Courage?

Dr. Teotia: I’ve known her for over 10 years, and she astounds me by seeking aesthetic excellence in her reconstructive outcome in a way that makes it easier for me to perform my procedures in a relaxed manner. She has never been demanding of a particular result but understands the journey and gives me artistic freedom, which has benefitted her result. I have enjoyed knowing her over the years, as she is steadfast about living a productive life.

PSN: If you could use one word to describe Tamara, what word would you choose?

Dr. Teotia: Unassailable. **PSN**



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Allergan continues BRA Day support

Allergan Aesthetics, an AbbVie company, has again committed to be a Diamond Sponsor for Breast Reconstruction Awareness Day, continuing its longstanding support for The PSF's Breast Reconstruction Awareness Campaign.

"Allergan Aesthetics is pleased to be the Diamond Sponsor for Breast Reconstruction Awareness at the national level," says Heath Ponder, the company's director of strategic communications. "We have been a longtime supporter of Breast Reconstruction Awareness Day efforts and will continue the commitment to the cause. Education and awareness for breast reconstruction patients and surgeon customers are at the very core of our company values."

Launched by ASPS and The PSF in 2012, the Breast Reconstruction Awareness USA Campaign is instrumental in letting women understand the range of options they have following a breast cancer diagnosis. Plastic surgeons play an important role in a breast cancer patient's recovery process – and the annual Breast Reconstruction Awareness Day movement gives those surgeons an opportunity to empower cancer patients, celebrate survivors and help women make an informed decision at the time of diagnosis.

The campaign would not be possible without the generous support of dedicated corporate sponsors. Thanks to their commitment, the Breast Reconstruction Awareness Campaign continues to provide education and resources to close the loop on breast cancer throughout the year.

This year's Breast Reconstruction Awareness Day will take place on Oct. 19. For more information about the campaign, please visit thepsf.org/programs/breast-reconstruction-awareness-campaign. **PSN**



Patient of Courage

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PSN: Can you discuss your outreach efforts to support breast cancer patients in your community – including your volunteer work with AiRS?

Sieger: I knew I wanted to give back and provide some meaning to my diagnosis to make a difference for others. I began volunteering for "Still Blessed with One Less," a small, local non-profit that helps women with living expenses following mastectomy. I was asked to support and mentor local women following a breast cancer diagnosis. Everyone is famous in a small town, and in my case, it was well-known that I was going through my own battle. I've called many women I don't know since my diagnosis to offer support, advice and resources – but primarily to let them know they aren't alone. I also volunteered for the local chapter of Susan G. Komen and the American Cancer Society and received national recognition for the top fundraising award per capita in the nation for our local Relay for Life Event, for which I served on the leadership team.

In 2012, I began as the first volunteer for AiRS, a 501c(3) nonprofit that has a mission to be a resource and support system for women who have undergone mastectomies as a result of breast cancer or BRCA+ genetic mutations. We educate them on reconstruction options and assist them with the cost of reconstructive surgery. As a volunteer, I developed the agency's first patient-care advocacy program to educate, advocate and support women through the physical and emotional recovery of breast reconstruction. I collaborate with board-certified plastic surgeons across the country to discount

surgical fees for many women who are uninsured or meet co-payments that they otherwise couldn't afford – a valuable resource to surgeons and patients alike.

I shared my breast-cancer journey at the 2011 initial launch of the AiRS Foundation in New York and at the annual AiRS-hosted Breast Reconstruction Awareness Days in Dallas. In 2017, I initiated legislation in Texas to promote Breast Reconstruction Awareness Day, and it became law in 2017. The patients I work with daily inspire me and remind me of the important work that we do with AiRS, not only in supporting the physical but also the emotional recovery from breast cancer.

PSN: What does Dr. Teotia mean to you?

Sieger: I was extremely fortunate to have such an excellent and skilled plastic surgeon. Dr. Teotia was optimistic and always greeted me with a smile. We immediately developed a rapport, and he provided a positive light and hope during a dark diagnosis. I felt he truly cared about achieving a natural aesthetic result that I would be extremely pleased with.

My reconstructive journey has spanned 11 years to date. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have a surgeon of Dr. Teotia's caliber who remained with me through it all to ensure that I'm restored. I'm eternally grateful for his sacrifices to help women to not only survive, but to thrive after breast cancer. **PSN**



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