

# Gut Feeling Saved My Life

As she sat on the floor packing away Christmas decorations, Heather Phillips began to cry. She was thinking about writing letters to her two young children so they would have something to open from their mum the following year. Diagnosed with breast cancer a month earlier, she had no idea what the future held - or whether she had one at all. Story and pictures by **Zoe Ash**



**GIFT OF LIFE:** Midwife Heather Phillips Pictured here with baby Joe Luca Bougourd. Now she appreciates every day

It's as if your life is a puzzle and someone has thrown it up in the air and you have to put it back together,' said Heather Phillips. She was diagnosed with cancer late last year, having noticed a lump 'about the size of a baked bean' in her left breast. Heather thought it was a cyst. Eighteen months beforehand she'd had a similar lump, diagnosed as such following a mammogram. She kept an eye on it and although there was no change, remained nervous. But by the beginning of December she'd decided she must get it checked and made an appointment. 'I can't really explain why, but I felt a strange sense of doom,' she said. The doctor didn't think it was anything to worry about, but Heather insisted on a referral.

'If a woman has a gut feeling, she has to go with

children Alexandra, 12, and Christopher, 9, she was dealing with the very real possibility that she had a life-threatening condition.

'I was trying to get on with things, keep it as normal as possible,' she said. That morning, her younger sister, Sharon, arrived to stay for the Christmas break. It was a Thursday and the pair went into Town for some late night shopping.

'It was a bit bizarre. I was quite sure I had cancer and it all seemed slightly unreal,' she said, describing how she wandered in and out of packed shops and between carol singers in a daze. The next morning she had her diagnosis.

'Mr Rice looked me

all reconstruction work is carried out in the UK. Having both the mastectomy and reconstruction at the same time was an option, but one that Heather couldn't face.

'I wanted to rid my body of disease, that was my priority,' she said, adding that she felt the need to be at home, surrounded by her family and friends. Heather had a week to think about her future. She would go back to Mr Rice with her decision on Christmas Eve. On the Sunday before Christmas, she took the difficult decision to tell her family. This included not only her young children, but also her younger sister, Wendy, who lives in Florida, and twin sister, Shirley, also a midwife, who lives in California.

it,' said the midwife of 17 years' standing, who is only top aware that 80% of abnormalities in the breast are discovered by women through self-checks. Heather saw consultant Jonathan Rice on 14 December and was booked in for a mammogram. The following morning, while everyone around was panicking about Christmas shopping, she was driving towards the PEH, convinced she had cancer.

There was nothing to suggest she should: no family history that might put her more at risk. It was just an instinctive feeling. Straight after the mammogram, the radiologist gave her some unexpected news. 'What you have in your left breast,' she was told, 'is a cyst, hi fact, you have four of them, but I'm seeing something of concern in the mammogram of your right breast.'

Heather remembers every word. 'I can replay it like a tape in my head,' she said.

Following an ultrasound scan, a core biopsy was taken. Such areas can develop naturally in the breast as we age and are not always cancerous, but Heather was unconvinced. 'I can't explain why, but I knew I was going to be diagnosed with cancer,' she said. Karen Leach, clinical nurse specialist at the breast screening unit, was with her throughout and asked if she was OK. 'As a matter of fact, I'm not, because I know what the result is going to be,' she replied.

straight in the eye and said; "We've found something." I turned to Karen and said, "See, I told you",' she said.

'It was a bit of a haze but I could hear his voice clearly. DCIS. High-grade. Multi-focal. He said, "Heather, do you know what I'm saying?". I said: "Yes, you're telling me I have to have my breast removed." Then I looked at my watch and it was five to one. The day the children broke up for the Christmas holidays. I told him I had to pick up my son and the normality of being a mum kicked in. It wasn't a good day.'

Heather felt that it was all very unfair. She has lived her life well. She doesn't smoke or drink, has a healthy diet and isn't overweight. She'd had two children and breast-fed them. 'I was putting ticks in all the right boxes,' she said. 'How could I possibly have cancer?'

Fifty women in Guernsey are diagnosed with breast cancer every year. That's almost one a week. 'If I was buying a lottery ticket I wouldn't win, but whether I like it or not, I've become an elite member of a club I don't want to be in,' Heather said. She is certain that if she hadn't gone with her instincts, insisting on a mammogram, she would still be walking around with cancer. She had no

Her parents were visiting for Christmas and when she told them, the news was greeted with total silence.

"They were devastated,' she said, 'I remember my mum saying, "It should be me, Heather.".' There was a further concern. As Shirley is an identical twin, she went for a mammogram and has now herself been recalled, with the result still pending.

When it came to telling her two children, Heather was offered great support from the Sunflower Trust. They sent her a pack with books and information designed to help children cope with serious illness and bereavement, 'I told them that baby cancer cells had been found and if the doctor removed them, that would be it. All fixed,' she said. They reacted in very different ways but were the only things that kept her spirits up and kept her going. The early days after the diagnosis were very difficult for Heather and her family. 'For my sister, Sharon, it was a very different Christmas from the one we had planned and I can never repay her for the strength she shared with me,' said Heather. They went for beach walks and drank a lot of tea, all the time researching what would be the best way forward.

hi reality there was no decision to be made. Life-

While Heather was putting up the Christmas tree and wrapping presents for her

**'Mr Rice looked me straight in the eye and said: "We've found something." I turned to Karen and said "See, I told you".'**

symptoms, no lump in the affected breast and no pain. Although the diagnosis was of a non-invasive cancer of the milk ducts, it was high grade in two quadrants of the breast and behind the nipple. It would have developed the ability to spread. Although mastectomies are performed locally,

preserving intervention was needed and Heather was booked in for a mastectomy at the beginning of January. All she had to do was get through Christmas. It was only when that distraction was over that the

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"I do feel incredibly lucky, but lucky isn't a word you use when you've had a breast removed."

seriousness of the situation hit home. Her sister had left and she was sitting alone, packing *tony* title decorations. I contemplated writing the children a letter for the following Christmas. Now\* seems ridiculous,' she recalled, "that was one of the worst days. I never wrote those letters? Heather's parents arrived too days before the operation, I drove to the airport to defy: them and as they came through the arrival dopes, I had a wonderful sense of calm. I felt a bit like a little girl again. I knew everything was going to be OK as I hugged them tighter than ever before.'

After the surgery, there was a nervous wait for the results. But detailed pathological tests revealed that the cancer had been contained within the milk ducts and Heather was in the clear. 'I do feel incredibly lucky, but then,

you use when you've had a breast removed,' she said. Heather was fitted with a prosthesis after the operation but found it uncomfortable. She decided to seek advice on reconstruction and had her first consultation last week. "There are aspects of my life that have changed for the better. I have stronger friendships and I've met the most amazing women since meeting the Pink Ladies support group. They are very special women I would never have met otherwise,' she said. 'We've laughed together, cried together and raced for life together. We share a common disease but we've shared so much more.

'I now have knowledge of a disease affecting 40,000 women in the British Isles each year. I know the feelings of shock, fear and sadness at the diagnosis and, most importantly,

I can share with women the reassurance that we have the most wonderful breast unit, from screening right through to surgery and aftercare. They all work with compassion

and a real understanding of the enormity of this life-changing event for a woman,' she said. 'As a midwife you witness the fragility of life. This is what had to be done to preserve my Me.

'This is what allows me to see my children grow up. It makes you look at your life and appreciate every day. You can't take it for granted that you'll have tomorrow.'

- If you would like help with how to approach the subjects of serious illness or bereavement with children, contact Katie Sweeney at the Sunflower Trust on 266932.

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