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Gina Embraces Community Relationships... For a Better Way

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Gina Embraces Community Relationships...for a Better Way

By Susan I. Shiber

Photography by Kelly O'Keefe



"For a Better Way," Gina works closely with healthcare professionals throughout the region. Gina is pictured with two of these professionals, Dr. Singer and Dr. Veitia. "The surgery performed today is profoundly wonderful," exclaims Gina. "Drs. Singer and Veitia, for example, do impeccable reconstructive work. My staff and I are in awe when their patients visit Gië Gië."

The most evidential risk factors for breast cancer are being a woman and growing older. Those candid odds come from *BreastCancer.org*, a nonprofit online resource that provides insightful up-to-the-minute information, answers to an endless array of questions, and sensitive support for anyone touched by breast cancer.

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer among American women. The latest figures, reported two years ago, indicate that an estimated 230,480 new invasive cases of the disease were expected to be diagnosed. That same year, there were 2.6 million breast cancer survivors in the U.S.

THERE MUST BE A BETTER WAY

Gina Mastrangelo, owner of Gië Gië Lingerie & Breast Care, says she is living her dream. That dream is providing a safe, comfortable, and fun environment for women, particularly those faced with breast cancer. "This is who I am. This is why I'm here," she insists.

Product of a large Italian family, the happy child was embraced with warmth, love, and joyful times. Although she cherished her Barbie dolls, Gina jumped right in when cousins started a street ball game. A buoyant blend of femininity and spirited adventurer, she favored frilly lingerie and sporty togs with equal pleasure. Remember that thought; it's essential to what happens years later.

When Gina was 19, her Aunt Jackie had breast cancer. "She had a radical mastectomy, but it metastasized to her bones and shoulders causing her death. She was only 43 and had six very young kids. It was so traumatic." Another aunt, who is nearly 100, also had breast cancer that was successfully treated with a lumpectomy.

Perhaps these experiences paved the way for Gina's breakthrough. A breakthrough that launched Gië Gië. Gina began her professional life as a hairdresser. When



Gië Gië features well-appointed, spacious fitting rooms.

a chemical allergy forced her to reconsider careers, she went to computer school, but opted for a job videotaping surgeries and producing presentations for an orthopaedic surgeon friend. From there, she chose a position fitting braces, went on to medical billing, and next landed at a private prosthetic orthotic company.

Gina shudders as she discusses that period in her life. “When women asked for breast prosthetics, the typical response was: *Go back there and, try on a bra. Here are books you can review then choose what you want.* I couldn’t help but be shocked by the insensitivity.

“There I was,” Gina continues, “this little person from Upper Darby realizing there is a travesty in how women with breast cancer are viewed and treated. Where was the respect? Where was the store that catered to their needs in style? Where were the people who cared how they felt? There had to be a better way.”

There was a better way and Gina found it. Six years ago, she launched her business as a professional boutique for

women with breast cancer and a magnificent boutique for anyone who loves fashionable lingerie and boudoir wear, featuring such exceptional lines as Anita, Claire Pettibone, Freya, Felina, Spanx, Panache, Arianne, Chantelle, Amoena, Le Mystère, Hanky Panky, Wacoal, PJ Harlow, Honeydew, Eberjey, and more. The name Gië Gië reflects the store’s romantic girly girl attitude and extensive product lines that include far more than perfectly fitting bras.

Nurtured by Gina’s unbridled enthusiasm and joy that she is making a difference, the full-service breast care boutique blossomed. Inspired by her love of *frou-frou* and all things that celebrate the sensual side of women, the store’s lingerie attracts a wide clientele and is a favorite shopping spot for anyone who exalts womanhood.

Gië Gië endows women with power and puts pizzazz in shopping before and after breast cancer surgery. Clients are comfortable as they look for and learn about silicone breast prostheses, breast forms, pocketed bras, camisoles, and lymphede-

ma compression garments. They quickly realize that a personally fitted bra of exceptional quality, or a properly weighted breast form restores confidence and goes a long way to improve a woman’s self-image after surgery. They are pleased to discover bras that match various procedures, such as mastectomy, lumpectomy, augmentation, reduction, or reconstruction of one or both breasts.

In addition to Gina, her professional team includes three certified fitters who customize bras and forms to meet every issue. Not only breast cancer survivors, but all women should have bras that fit just right. From first bra to one that boosts sagging breasts, Gië Gië has it. “All women need to wear a bra that is precisely fitted to their unique shape and proportions,” declares Gina with the vigor of someone who knows she is right.

Toss in an intimate teddy, lacy peignoir, and Hanky Panky PJs. Suddenly *I Enjoy Being a Girl* lyrics linger as customers walk out the door *with a sweet and girlish gait, their hips kind of swivelly and swervey.*



Gina's community programs have been held at many hospitals, clinics, and healthcare events. She is always equipped with her tablet to handle one-on-one consultations or presentations to groups.

A TEAM THAT LISTENS

Giē Giē's professional staff (Molly, Cindy, and Alex) feels the same way about giving women a certain air of feminine mystique that makes them special. Their mission surpasses the business of selling bras and lingerie. "In the case of breast cancer survivors," points out Gina, "what the doctors do is great. We wrap up their work in a tailor-made package and tie it in a nice bow. This package is filled with emotional support, self-esteem, and quality of life. Making a difference is what

it's all about and, it's not just Giē Giē, it's an amazing team that has grown and flourished since we opened. A team that listens to women. We couldn't do what we do without these devoted professionals and organizations."

In addition to *Breastcancer.org*, praised by Gina as the best website for women going through breast cancer, team players are Unite for HER, Living Beyond Breast Cancer, and several other nonprofits. Her community outreach extends to Phoenixville Hospital, Abing-

ton Hospital, Lankenau Hospital, Bryn Mawr Hospital, The Chester County Hospital, Brandywine Hospital, Fox Chase Cancer Center, and Paoli Hospital. Among many physicians in collaboration with Gina are David P. Singer, MD, and Nestor A. Veitia, MD, both plastic surgeons with Surgical Specialists, P.C., and Marisa C. Weiss, MD, a breast oncologist at Lankenau Hospital, who founded *Breastcancer.org* and Living Beyond Breast Cancer.

"The surgery performed today is profoundly wonderful," exclaims Gina. "Drs. Singer and Veitia, for example, do impeccable reconstructive work. My staff and I are in awe when their patients visit Giē Giē."

It's a mutual admiration society. The doctors commend Gina for her professional services and dedication. "Numerous patients told me about the shop and how comfortable they are there, so I began referring Giē Giē," notes Dr. Singer. "It's a place I trust. The fitters are well-trained and understand breast reconstruction; the store carries everything a woman should have after surgery from prostheses to bras to bathing suits. Gina has a fun attitude that makes you happy. Women appreciate this at time when they need to feel good."

Dr. Veitia concurs with his colleague. "Gina is an integral part of patient collaboration. She sees them before, during, and after breast reconstruction. I suggest Giē Giē because I know Gina will help women through the process. Her products, personality, and great sense of humor allow women to maintain their dignity at a scary time."

Dignity is key to full recovery. Gina frequently brings this message to community events, breast cancer survivor support groups, and hospitals throughout the region. Since her store opened, she has given encouragement, strength, and fortitude to more than 5,000 women. "I have a *show and tell* format combining PowerPoint with actual products," explains Gina. "In addition to showing breast forms, prosthetics and bra styles, sizes, and fabrics, I stress how the importance of proper fit, product care, and when to purchase new items. Not all programs are for breast cancer survivors, but each one emphasizes why women should be properly fitted."



Gina ensures that her staff, too, be proficient in all aspects of fitting. Gina trains her professional team to prepare for The American Board for Certification in Orthotics & Prosthetics (ABC). The ABC mission is to establish and promote the highest standards of organizational and clinical performance in the delivery of orthotics and prosthetics. As an ABC accredited facility, Gië Gië represents the profession's most rigorous professional achievements.

Gina's community programs have been held at Lankenau Hospital's Women's Health Source, Senior Citizen Center in Downingtown, Bryn Mawr Hospital Comprehensive Breast Center, and at newly diagnosed patient programs at Paoli and Phoenixville Hospitals. Bonnie Devine met her at a RAD PAK meeting. "Gina came in with her bras, breast forms, prosthetic products, and accessories," recalls the breast cancer survivor. "A number of us went to her boutique and had a very pleasant experience."

Bonnie, now 70, was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1979 and had a radical hysterectomy. "Although it took 10 years to put it out of mind, I was convinced that I had beaten my cancer, so there was nothing more to worry about. No symptoms. No fears. No concerns. Then nearly 25 years later, I went for my annual mammogram and lo and behold, there was an abnormal amount of necrology – just too many cells had died in a year. I had tests and freaked out waiting for results. I was sure I was going to die. I went home after the biopsy crying that I wouldn't see my granddaughter Becca grow up."

Bonnie's test results showed DCIS (ductal carcinoma in situ), which is the most common type of noninvasive breast cancer. It puts individuals at higher risk for developing a new breast cancer. Treatment is generally a lumpectomy followed by radiation.



Bonnie had a lumpectomy, a second surgery, and completed radiation therapy. “I’m not as casual about this cancer as I was the first time,” she admits. “I see it every day. One breast is larger and even though the scar is smaller than the one from my hysterectomy, it’s above the mirror. Plus, I developed lymphedema and must wear compression stockings and night garments. I’ve become a missionary mandating a congressional bill to allow these costly products to be covered by Medicare. But that’s another story. Fortunately, my breast products are covered.”

Gina and her staff delight in visits from this feisty breast cancer survivor, who annually dyes her hair pink for Race for the Cure. “We are grateful to know Bonnie,” remarks Gina, “and have played a part in her journey with breast cancer.” Bonnie appreciates how easy Giē Giē’s staff makes shopping. “I simply come in with my prescription, and they handle all the paperwork. You walk in and know you found a home. You may feel damaged or different, and they put you at ease in an intimate relaxed setting. The chandeliers, curtains, photos, and ambience go hand-in-hand making us feel more beautiful.

“The highest praise I can give the store is my recommendation to others. You don’t have to be a breast cancer patient to need a good bra. I took my grand-

daughter, Amanda, for her first fitting. She was nervous and didn’t want anyone to see her. Molly Dorais waited on her. Within five minutes, they were best buddies, and she welcomed her to the dressing room. Now, all my friends go to Giē Giē, and we love it,” sums up Bonnie.

INVITE INTIMACY BACK

Dr. Weiss, who often refers patients to Giē Giē, views Gina as an integral part of the recovery team. “She is a rare individual – warm, compassionate, knowledgeable, highly professional, and accessible. As a breast cancer survivor myself, I’m a beneficiary of the store. A store that anyone can go to, by the way, not just breast cancer survivors.”

The physician, author, and breast cancer advocate urged Gina to add the LELO product line as another way to allow women to recapture their former lives and sex appeal. In her book, *Living Well Beyond Breast Cancer*, Dr. Weiss explains that many patients report having less sex than before their illness. One reason is because the experience slows the body down resulting in being less interested in sexual intercourse. Sex may also be uncomfortable or even painful, particularly if sudden onset menopause occurs as a medication side effect.

“To a lot of women, the breast is an important sex organ,” stresses Dr. Weiss.

“If altered or removed, intimacy takes a real hit. They need a resource to guide them back to their former sexual satisfaction. A respectable place to discover new tricks. When a woman is ready to re-explore that part of her life, it’s a good sign she is on the way to recovery.”

Gina took the physician’s advice and introduced the Swedish LELO line to customers. LELO is the world’s leading designer brand for intimate lifestyle products. The company’s advisory board of 12 independent medical specialists promotes the fact that optimal sexual health and wellness are vital to full recovery from breast cancer. Dr. Michael Krychman, LELO medical advisory board chairman, and Dr. Weiss champion the use of self stimulators, coupled with appropriate education, to aid in healing a woman’s sexual self-esteem and renewing intimacy. The products can prolong foreplay and assist in functions affected by breast cancer, medication, and chemotherapy.

Rediscovering intimacy is committed to sensual well-being. “This is one aspect of a woman’s health that is often overlooked,” says LELO USA Marketing Director Donna Faro.

I FEEL LIKE ME AGAIN

Treatment for breast cancer continues to make strides to improve outcomes. Surgical options include mastectomy, lumpectomy, lymph node removal, sentinel lymph node dissection, and breast reconstruction.

Breast reconstruction choices vary. Expander implants, direct-to-implants, and latissimus dorsi flap are among them. Women who elect breast implants require the least surgery. When complete, the new breast won’t have the same sensitivity or look as a natural one, and more surgery is required to create a new nipple and areola. Plastic surgeons often prefer a combination of techniques using a patient’s tissue to create nipples and areolas.

Some surgeries call for additional expansion treatments until the implant reaches desired size. Over the course of care, breast product needs change. Gina really understands reconstruction. She and her staff are skilled in fitting a post-op woman in prostheses, bras, bathing suits, and lingerie.

“I have everything she needs,” declares Gina. “My goal is to empower breast cancer survivors and make recovery easier. The doctors do their magic, and we step in to link puzzle pieces. We address symmetry, comfort, and personality. A lot of women cry after their fitting because Giē Giē is a feminine, pleasant place – a girlfriend place. When we reply *beautiful* after a woman asks how she looks, the smile on her face is our reward.”

Sissy Morelock is one of those rewards. “I feel like Giē Giē is an extension of my family,” she notes. “I am a permanent lifetime customer.”

“When we first met Sissy, she was 19 weeks pregnant and on her way to the hospital to have a mastectomy,” relates Gina. “Throughout her surgeries, chemotherapy, and the subsequent birth of her daughter, she maintained an extraordinarily upbeat attitude. We celebrate each and every visit she makes to Giē Giē, especially the ones that involve that precious, miracle baby.”

Sissy was diagnosed with Paget’s disease, a rare form of cancer that affects mammary ducts, when her son Dylan was a toddler, and she was expecting daughter Mackenzie. “Paget’s resembles eczema on the nipple,” she explains. “I thought it may be from breast feeding, although it was a year since I stopped. My OB sent me to a dermatologist and ultimately, a biopsy revealed DCIS, which required surgery. We then learned that my cancer was HER2 positive, a more aggressive form that necessitated chemotherapy.”

Sissy and her husband Kevin were relieved to know that chemo would not hurt the baby. Molecules are too large to pass through the placenta. “Mackenzie was born with a full head of hair, and I was bald,” she laughs. “We both wore pink beanie caps.”

Dr. Singer performed Sissy’s reconstructive surgery. “He’s fabulous,” she gushes. “I had such wonderful care from him and the surgical team at Paoli Hospital. I never had to call anyone; they always reached out to me. These doctors made a terrible situation go as smoothly as possible.

“Throughout all this, Gina was there for support. Kevin and I decided to pop in and see what it was all about before going to the hospital. I got such big hugs

and everyone was so accommodating. After Mackenzie was born, I contracted pancreatitis and had gallstones removed. Now that I’m officially done with surgery, I’m going to Giē Giē to buy all that *fun stuff*.”

It’s consistent, dedicated community interaction and professional relationships that introduce women like Bonnie and Sissy to Gina and Giē Giē. And it’s the unremitting warmth, respect, pro-

fessional care, and all that *fun stuff* that brings women back, time and time again, to Gina and Giē Giē. **CCL**

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