

# Code Talkers



**Genome readers honor genetic counselors  
who interpret complexity with compassion.**

Made possible by





# Peggy Walker

## In Our Corner

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**Peggy Walker**  
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**The house was quiet** on that September morning. It was time. Slowly and shakily, I made my way to the mirror. I took a deep breath and readied myself for the sight. Biting down on my lower lip, I carefully removed the bandages and surveyed my chest. No curves, just flatness, loose, hanging skin, black and blue bruises, stitches, and four drainage tubes.

The same breasts that had sported my first bra at age 12 and nursed my three babies were gone. Gone — all in the hopes of reducing my chance of developing breast cancer. I stood there, a 33-year-old “previvor” lost in introspection, and I could not help but cry — not for what had been lost, but for all that had been gained through that empowering choice.

Although I could never fully express the depth of my appreciation for so many and so much during that time, I would like to offer a glimpse of the gratitude that resides in my heart for Peggy Walker, my family’s genetic counselor. It is with great honor to her that I chronicle all of the ways that she was there for my mother, my two sisters, and me during our fight against genetic cancer.

In March 2015, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and learned that she carried the BRCA1 genetic mutation. As if the explosion of the breast cancer bomb was not enough, the aftermath of learning that hereditary breast and ovarian cancer could be passed

on to her children was piercingly cruel. My mother wept for her three daughters instead of weeping for herself. Peggy was there to comfort her. A seasoned counselor, Peggy helped my mother to emotionally process her own circumstances, logically understand the genetic course (which was especially interesting because my mother was adopted), and pragmatically consider her options.

When I met with Peggy in May 2015, it was the first time that my health had been in question. I was confounded with conflicting emotions. While I hoped for the best, I felt an inherent responsibility, as the eldest child, to be the one who carried the genetic mutation. I found myself praying that God would let it be me — not my sisters. As I confessed these thoughts to Peggy, she listened and reassured me that my feelings were understandable.

When Peggy called to confirm my BRCA1 mutation, her voice was calm and full of compassion. As my husband and I prayerfully considered our path, Peggy offered to meet with us together. She resketched my family tree, translated technical terms, and fielded lots of questions. In her responses, it was apparent that Peggy had kept abreast of current research, but rather than relying on medical jargon, she communicated the information to us like a knowledgeable friend. We left her office feeling confident in our comprehension.

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That assurance served me well a month later, when I had the opportunity to meet one of my mother’s biological brothers, whom she had never met. He proudly shared pictures of his three little girls, and my heart tightened in my chest. It was imperative that he know about our family’s BRCA1 risk — this stranger connected to me by genetics.

I was scared, but Peggy was there, in my mind, so I pushed through the fear and introduced him to our genetic history, just as Peggy had explained it to me. Consequently, he pursued genetic testing and discovered that he too carries the BRCA1 mutation.

In the coming months, I recovered from my own surgery and began screenings for ovarian cancer. My two sisters each met with Peggy for genetic counseling and testing. While my youngest sister tested negative for the BRCA1 mutation, my middle sister tested positive and underwent a prophylactic bilateral mastectomy in February 2016.

From the beginning and through it all, Peggy has been there for us. Peggy individually counseled and tested four women in my family and celebrated our united fortitude as we faced three bilateral mastectomies inside of a year. This is my family’s fight against genetic cancer, and I am so thankful that Peggy Walker has been in our corner. 🙏