

Code Talkers



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

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INVITAE



Susan Thompson My Best Friend

L TO R:
SUSAN, ELIZABETH

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I am fortunate because my genetic counselor, Susan Thompson, is also my best friend. However, I am completely convinced that she was first put in my life as a friend in order to save my life as a genetic counselor later.

Susan and I met in 1994 at The Ohio State University during fall sorority recruitment. We instantly clicked and became sorority pledge class sisters. We eventually became roommates and the best of friends. As adults, our friendship continued to grow as we explored careers and furthered our educations. We were in each other's weddings, experienced motherhood together, and were there for each other through all of life's normal ups and downs.

It was in 2004, 10 years after our friendship began, that I realized why she had been put in my life. In a casual conversation about my paternal grandfather's passing from pancreatic cancer earlier in the year, Susan began asking me a series of questions. Was I aware whether my grandfather had any relatives that had been diagnosed with breast cancer? She was adamant that I find out. When I came to her with the news that, yes, my paternal grandfather's sister and two nieces (none of whom I had ever met) all had been diagnosed

with breast cancer, she asked to speak with my entire family. My father agreed to take a genetic test, and Susan's suspicions were confirmed — he was a BRCA1 gene mutation carrier.

Susan was invaluable to me and my family throughout the process. She answered all of our questions patiently, professionally, and thoroughly. Now it was my turn to decide if I too would take the test that would tell me whether or not I carried the same genetic mutation. I will never forget that day, sitting with Susan, my parents, and an oncologist from the OhioHealth Cancer Center. My best friend delivered the devastating news to me and my parents that I had an 86 percent lifetime chance of developing breast and/or ovarian cancer. A few years later, Susan was there to deliver that same news to my younger sister.

After the initial shock, I decided that this news, as well as Susan, were gifts. If she and I had never met, who else would have put the puzzle pieces together? To this day, 12 years later, medical professionals consistently ask me who on my mother's side of the family carries the genetic mutation or has had breast cancer. "It is from my father's side of the family," I patiently answer. "Oh," they answer

in a surprised tone. Now, I know that these medical professionals are intelligent people and understand that 50 percent of my genetic makeup is from my father. But with my particular cancer risk, BRCA1, the focus is unfortunately primarily on women. Therefore, without the specific knowledge and intuition that my genetic counselor held, I am not sure that I would have ever discovered my genetic mutation. I would not have had the opportunities for early detection tests such as mammograms, MRIs, ultrasounds, and CA 125 testing. My insurance would not have covered the prophylactic oophorectomy that I had performed last summer. I would not even have the option to begin the planning of a prophylactic mastectomy.

I have witnessed young friends of mine get diagnosed with breast cancer and even die after a long-fought battle. All of them were blindsided, but I have been proactive all of these years and will never be blindsided. So far, I have not had a cancer diagnosis. I will diligently continue to do what I can to prevent a diagnosis and to practice early detection. Either way, I am ready to face my high-risk status thanks to my best friend and genetic counselor, Susan Thompson. 🧠

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