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A Mother's Memory

By Haley Shapley

Seventeen years after losing her mom to breast cancer, Pat Smith keeps her legacy alive.

Two weeks into her freshman year of college, Pat Smith was excitedly preparing for her mom and dad to arrive on campus for parents weekend. But instead of a visit, the 17-year-old got a call — her mom would not be able to make it, as she was undergoing surgery in the wake of a breast cancer diagnosis.

"I was totally in shock. I can remember the moment, what I was doing, who was with me," Smith says. "Back in 1988, breast cancer was like a death sentence. I just automatically thought, 'My mom's going to die.' The thought of her not being there with me was really indescribable."

After a five-year fight, Smith's mom did succumb to the disease, leaving her 22-year-old daughter brokenhearted. "She was the foundation and cornerstone in our home and for our entire family," Smith remembers. "She was the type of mom who when she said it, she meant it — she wasn't anybody to play with. All of a sudden to not have her was very hard as a young woman; it really did create a big void for me."

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Four months later, Smith went on to become the first African-American Miss Virginia USA, then was crowned first runner-up the next year at Miss USA. Without her mom there, the victories were bittersweet, but Smith paid tribute to her memory throughout the competitions by using breast cancer awareness as her platform.

A longtime philanthropist — Smith is the President of Pat & Emmitt Smith Charities (created with her husband), as well as Founder and CEO of Treasure You — she began feeling the pull last year around the anniversary of her mother's death to once again get involved with breast cancer initiatives, and as a result, created the nonprofit Page's Angels. Of the name, she says, "My mother's middle name [was Page], and it's what her family called her growing up. After my mom died, there were a lot of women who filled in the gap for me as mentors, or as I call them, angels my mom sent to me." The organization aims to help women who've gone through breast cancer, domestic violence, and other major setbacks.

Smith also recently served as honorary chair at the Yellow & Black Tie Gala for Methodist Richardson Cancer Center after being asked by Linda Armstrong Kelly, mom of Lance Armstrong. Smith toured the cancer center and loved the work they were doing, especially with children of cancer patients.

"I want to give kids hope that even though, yes, it hurts — I still haven't gotten over it; I'm 39 years old and I still cry for my mom. But you can get on with your life and still celebrate their life," she says. "It's important for me to be that beacon of hope for young kids."

Although Smith was a young adult when her mother died, she still needed her — and will continue to do what she can to keep the gone-too-soon situation from happening to other families. "I lost my mom way too early. She was unable to see her baby girl grow up, become a woman, get married, and see her grandkids," Smith says. "For me, it's important to get the word out there to women about the use of early detection methods."



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