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# A Chance of Living Again

After a devastating loss, Rosalba Correa chooses radical surgery to fight a dangerous genetic predisposition.

By Kathryn Stewart

If someone offered you a chance to prevent cancer in your body, would you take it? What if it meant having surgery?

Rosalba Correa did, and she doesn't regret it. In 2016, a heartbreaking sequence of events led to her decision to have both her breasts removed.

In August of 2016, Rosalba was at the bedside of her sister Asor, who was dying of breast cancer. At age 29 and with a 4-year-old daughter at home, Asor should have had a long, full life ahead. Instead, she was suffering the ravages of breast cancer.

As Rosalba, now 45, watched Asor slip away, she learned that the very same disease might be likely to strike her too. Because of Asor's young age at diagnosis and several other cases of breast cancer in the family, Elizabeth Cunningham, MD, FACS, a board-certified general surgeon and fellowship-trained surgical oncologist who is privileged at Queen of the Valley Medical Center, recommended that Asor's relatives be tested for a genetic mutation called BRCA.

Rosalba agreed to the test, which came back positive.

As Dr. Cunningham explained, "We know there's an up to 87 percent risk for breast cancer by age 70 in a patient with one of these mutations."

At first, Rosalba felt hopeless, until Dr. Cunningham shared something else — that she could dramatically reduce Rosalba's risk by performing a prophylactic double mastectomy. Rosalba decided immediately to have the procedure. "I didn't want to go through the whole process that I had seen my sister go through," she said through an interpreter.

But there was a problem. Rosalba, a caregiver for the elderly, does not have health insurance. However, through a referral from her primary care physician, she was able to be referred to a program called Operation Access, which connects patients in need with doctors and hospitals willing to donate their services. "When I got the letter that I was accepted, it was a really emotional moment for me," Rosalba said. "It was a chance of living again."



Rosalba Correa and her niece enjoy quality time together in the park.

Rosalba had been referred to Operation Access previously for a separate procedure. Through Operation Access, she would be able to continue with Dr. Cunningham, a breast surgeon she trusted. Soon she went for a preoperative consultation with Tyler Street, MD, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon who is privileged at Queen of the Valley Medical Center. Dr. Street also made Rosalba feel comfortable. "Reconstruction is really important to a woman's physical and psychological wellbeing," he said.

In February 2017, Dr. Cunningham performed a skin-sparing double mastectomy. During the procedure, Dr. Street began the reconstruction process, which takes several months to complete.

"It's a tremendous gift to have physicians, like Dr. Cunningham and Dr. Street — as well as hospitals, such as Queen of the Valley — willing to donate their time, talent and state of the art facilities to make a difference, and save someone's life," said Daniel Rabkin, program manager at Operation Access.

In addition, breast implants were donated by Mentor; anesthesia services were provided by Anesthesia & Analgesia Medical Group, Inc. (AAMGi) and pathology services were provided by Pacific Pathology Associates, Inc.

Today, Rosalba said she feels good, and is not worried. "I try to take care of myself and focus on me and my niece," she said. (After Asor's death in August 2016, it was decided that her daughter would come live with Rosalba. She also has four children of her own, ranging from 16 to 25.)

Above all, Rosalba is filled with gratitude. "I want to thank each and every one who helped me throughout this process," she said.

Queen of the Valley devotes a percentage of its net income to outreach activities and services that care for the underserved and disadvantaged. Partnerships with Operation Access — as well as schools, businesses, local community groups and national organizations — make an enduring impact on our community. For more information, visit [thequeen.org/community](http://thequeen.org/community).

