A Sister Story: Donna and Gail, Sisters and Best Friends

My sister Gall and I were best friends, shared a bedroom, and pretty much did everything together. After college we both moved to New York and then to Los Angeles and figured we would grow old together. That all changed in October 2001 when Gall discovered she had breast cancer. About a year later the cancer spread to her liver, which was devastating news since our father died of liver cancer. Gall was a fighter. We were together for every doctor’s appointment, every chemo session, every evening walk, but her cancer was aggressive. On December 4, 2003, Gall passed away in Santa Monica. She was only 46 years old. As soon as I heard about the Sister Study, I knew I had to sign up. Unfortunately, breast cancer seems to be more aggressive in African American women and community to participate in the study. She works through her local church groups to urge other seniors to participate.

Gall is a Latina breast cancer survivor. Her sister Gall is a participant. Together, they have appeared on radio and television shows speaking about their Sister Study involvement. Molly has recruited women from her family and community to participate in the study. She works through her local American Cancer Society chapter and community-based organizations to help spread the word about the Sister Study.

Celebrating Sister Study Participants

It’s hard to believe we are almost halfway through the Sister Study Recruitment years! In these two years, you have sent us a clear message—that you love your sisters, you hate breast cancer, and you want to be heard. None of our scientific theories could have predicted the enthusiasm you bring to this study.

Even in our firm commitment to maintain your privacy, you have compelled us to provide ways for you to tell your stories—of your sisters and your families and your commitment to eradicate breast cancer for your daughters and granddaughters. Each day you send us Sister Stories and tell us, “Here is our story! Post it on the website... send it to the newspaper... use it, however it will help!” In this newsletter you’ll read about some sister participants, and the ways they have adopted the Sister Study as their mission. As Spokespersons, they talk openly wherever they can to encourage more sisters to join. Yet for every Delores, Molly, or Lois, we realize there are a thousand more women who are reminded of breast cancer when they think of their sisters. Each day your stories remind us that what we are doing is really important.

You are amazing women. More than 25,000 strong so far. From Anchorage to Charleston, Santa Fe to San Juan, Portland to Palm Beach. You are farmers and fishers, homemakers and house painters, doctors, dentists and daycare givers. You are Native American, Alaskan, and Hawaiian. You are Black, Latina, Asian, and White. You live in the largest cities and the smallest towns. You are very different... yet you are all sisters. By joining the Sister Study you are breaking the silence that may help unlock the mysteries of breast cancer.
Sister Study Team at Work

Since 2003 Sister Study staff have worked diligently to enroll eligible sisters, prepare SISTER STUDY KITS, complete telephone interviews, perform home examinations, process laboratory specimens and questionnaires, respond to Helpdesk inquiries, and conduct periodic follow-ups. Below are some snapshots of our team at work.

The Sister Study team includes 50 telephone interviewers located in Durham, NC, and Mendoc, CA, who help sisters complete their 2-part telephone interviews. Some interviewers also answer calls and emails to the Helpdesk and answer calls to help women determine if they are eligible. Here, several of our staff assist a participant by researching a Helpdesk question.

The Sister Study laboratory team currently includes a lab director, a lab supervisor, and 6 biologists. They carefully unpack blood and urine samples as they arrive, dividing tubes of blood into smaller containers. The team also analyzes urine samples for glucose (sugar) reports.

Finally, after processing, blood and urine samples are placed in a central repository for safekeeping.

The Sister Study laboratory data processing team handles an average of 150 completed questionnaires a day. Questionnaires are reviewed and processed through our scanners, which automatically tabulate and store data.

Meet Your Recruitment Team

These are the women who maintain the spirit behind the study, reaching out to women from all walks of life to Spread the Word about the Sister Study.

Team members Catherine and Sara (front, L to R) are both Breast Cancer Survivors and speak convincingly to all women, including their daughters. Team members also conduct special outreach to African Americans, Latinas, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, Seniors, and to sisters who work in trades and blue collar jobs.

We give TV, radio and print interviews, design graphics and ads, travel to events, work the phones endlessly, and send out materials to volunteers. Our job is not complete until we have 50,000 committed sisters. Please help us Spread the Word!

Preliminary Sister Study Data

Study Progress

- 25,041 SISTER STUDY KITS delivered
- Over 40,000 sisters screened for eligibility
- 20,211 sisters completed both parts of the telephone interview
- Nearly 14,000 Sister Study Helpdesk calls and emails answered
- 21,143 home examinations performed
- Nearly 108,000 questionnaires processed and scanned
- 1,276,032 blood, urine, toenail, and dust samples handled and stored for later analysis

Sister Study Participants – Who You Are

You are busy and accomplished women
- 87% currently work full-time
- 20% work irregular hours or rotating shifts
- 32% ever worked as a teacher
- 16% ever worked as a nurse
- 14% ever worked in a factory
- 13% ever worked on a farm
- 3% ever worked in building construction

You come from all walks of life
- 81% had routine physical in the last year
- 88% went through menopause or had a hysterectomy
- 47% ever smoked
- 74% married
- 41% live in a suburban setting
- 3% currently live on a farm; 14% lived on a farm as a child
- 14 years average length of current residence
- 2.3 sisters on average

You have strong family connections to breast cancer
- 34% have a sister diagnosed before she was 45 years old
- 31% have a sister diagnosed within the past 2 years
- 19% have a mother diagnosed with breast cancer
- 12% have 2 or more sisters afflicted by breast cancer

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Sister Study En Espanol

The Sister Study is now available in Spanish. Women who prefer to use Spanish may initiate enrollment by calling toll-free 1-877-474-7837. The Spanish website is available at www.estudio.dehermanas.org.

If you can help spread the word to Latinas or want to learn more about our Spanish initiative, please contact Lourdes Suerez at 1-800-948-7552, ext. 4366.

Study Opens in PUERTO RICO

Researchers and sisters in Puerto Rico are very excited that their island is now part of the Sister Study. Since the women in Puerto Rico have higher rates of breast cancer compared with women in the U.S., Puerto Rican participation will enrich what we can learn about the causes of breast cancer in Latinas.

Lourdes Suarez