

'Cancer's never going to be in charge of me'

Since being diagnosed with breast cancer, singer Bernie Nolan, 49, has been filling her life with positives, as she tells us in this exclusive... that before she starts her treatment...



'I'm talking about all this to help people who are scared, or have no one to talk to'

Tell-tale signs

It was around Christmas when something in my left breast didn't feel right, and by January it didn't look right. A lot of women don't realise you need to look at your breasts in the mirror as well as feel them. The skin dimpled where the cancer was and that can be a sign. In 2006, I'd had a cyst drained and it was fine, so when I found a lump in the same place I just thought that bloody cyst had come back. For the next couple of months I was caught up doing *Popstar To Operastar* and then I went to have it checked out again in March.

Diagnosis

The diagnosis was HER2+ cancer, but in the early stages, which is good. It's an aggressive type, so they're going to treat it with Herceptin and a new drug Pertuzumab, from Germany. I'm having the chemo before my mastectomy because the cancer is in my lymph nodes, so it will kill

any cancer cells elsewhere. On the one hand you can consider that scary, but I see it as a positive.

I spoke to my sister Maureen first after the diagnosis, who cried. Then I got texts from Anne and Denise who I hadn't spoken to since last June because of a family rift. I've had two long conversations with Anne since, which has been lovely. It's really brought the family together. It's amazing how quickly treatments have improved. Linda was only diagnosed four years ago and already so many things have changed since then.

Early days

The hardest thing after getting the diagnosis was telling my 11-year-old daughter, Erin. Her first question was, "Are you going to die?" I said, "No, definitely not going to die. Look at Auntie Linda and Auntie Anne. They're still here." A couple of days later, she was watching me vacuuming. She said, "Mum,

you don't look like you've got breast cancer." The thing is, I don't feel ill. Linda was the same. I said, "I'm not ill. I just need to get this out of me and then I'll be fine."

Erin's been angry and taking it out on her dad Steve. I asked her what was wrong and she replied, "I don't want to say it." I said, "Do you think I'm going to die?"

She said yeah and started to cry.

But we've talked it out. Cancer's not a dirty word in our family because we've

dealt with it before. But Erin calls it Celia. I call it Bastard, but she can't say that! Humour helps, though. The only time I lost it was when I got in the car with Steve after the final results. He's been great - I'm going through this with my best pal. As we said, "For better or worse".

So much support

I'm having my mastectomy in January 2011 and I'm thinking I'll have a double one. Even if the chemo gets rid of the cancer, I've got calcium in my breasts which is a pre-cursor to cancer. I can't go through all this twice, so making that decision empowers me. Cancer isn't in charge of me and it never will be. When I have the mastectomy, I'll also have a reconstruction at the same time, so there'll never be a time when I'll be without breasts.

The support I've received has been unbelievable. A huge hamper arrived at home today from Fortnum & Mason from

the *Mum's The Word* cast. All my friends and my mates in the business, from *Brookside* to *The Bill*, have been brilliant. And I've had hundreds of e-mails and letters from wonderful, brave women. That's why I'm talking about all this - to help people who are scared or don't have anyone to talk to about what

they're going through. People have given me strength with their letters. I hope I can do the same.

'The support I've had is unbelievable'

Plans for the future

This is my last glam photo shoot before I start chemo. My hair will fall out and maybe my eyebrows and eyelashes, too. This might be the last time you see me when everything's mine, so I'm making the most of it! But at least I'm going to have a great set of boobs. My surgeon introduced me to a woman who he'd done a reconstruction on and her breasts looked incredible. Bring it on.

The first day of chemo is the first day of recovery. It finishes in October when my 50th birthday is and I'm still going to have a big party and enjoy a drink. I was going to do *Calendar Girls* later in the year with Lynda Bellingham and the producers are holding my role open. If I start next spring instead, I can show my new boobs off. I saw Lynda at the Michael Bubl  concert and she said, "Let's work towards that, then." So I am.

■ For more information visit www.cancerresearchuk.org



Bernie shows she's upbeat and fighting her cancer head-on



Still laughing, she's refusing to let it get her down...



... and striking her usual glamorous pose