

# Cancer-versary Is the Latest in Medical Sharing Parties

By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES Jan. 14, 2013



Bethany Kandel (center in brown) invited her girlfriends and mother to a "gratitude gathering" to celebrate five years of being cancer-free.

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Last October, New York City journalist Bethany Kandel passed an emotional milestone: She celebrated the fifth anniversary of being cancer-free after numerous surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation for breast cancer.

"I've been doing great and I didn't want to have a 'party' for fear of jinxing it, but wanted to somehow mark the occasion as being special and as a way of paying back for all that was done for me," said Kandel, 55.

She called her celebration a "gratitude gathering" and invited her mother and 15 of her best girlfriends for tea and dessert. The name seemed "less of a jinx," she said.

She served "boobie" cupcakes -- white frosting with pink blobs -- and pink ribbon chocolates on a stick and champagne.



Bethany Kandel served these "boobie" cupcakes at her cancer-versary party last year.

"In lieu of gifts, I asked each woman to bring a bag of wrapped hard candies and I delivered a huge basket of them all to my chemo ward where the nurses give them to the patients who get parched while in chemo," she said. "In this way, my gratitude over my clean bill of health and five-year milestone turned into a way for my friends to give back as well."

Cancer-versaries are the latest in medical sharing trends. There are others, too.

Women now hold festive mammogram events -- called "mamm" parties -- with refreshments and maybe even a spa treatment thrown in to make the diagnostic test less intimidating.

Mandy Kiser was recently invited to such a soiree by her employer, a bank in Wichita, Kan. For all its female employees, the bank provided chocolate fondue, paraffin wax hand treatments, back rubs and beauty consultations.

"What a great way to take the preconceived notion that a mammogram is a horrible, uncomfortable experience and make it into lovely evening," she told ABCNews.com last year. "It turned into a nice, relaxing time hanging out with friends and co-workers."

From Florida to California, certified ultrasound technicians are offering 4-D videos of the baby growing in the womb at [sonogram parties](#) sponsored by family and friends. Surprise baby showers and gender-reveal events can be held at home or even at a country club.

Viviana Aguilera, a 25-year-old teacher from Cape Coral, Fla., held her own [sonogram party](#) in her home so close friends and family could watch a moving image of her 29-week-old fetus moving in her womb. Long-distance family joined in by streaming the ultrasound on Facetime.

"It was awesome," said Aguilera recently. "The house was packed."

[Dr. Allen Gabriel](#), a reconstructive surgeon from Vancouver, Wash., said celebrations are important psychologically for women, especially cancer-free parties.

"What it does is bring friends and family together so they can acknowledge what has happened and what they have gone through," he said. "It brings them closer together and gives them an opportunity to reflect. Like a funeral, one year, two years, 40 years out after a person has died, some people go to church to reflect on the day."

When it comes to cancer, patients always have reoccurrence in their minds, so Gabriel provides resources for them through his foundation, [Pink Pathways](#), a professional mentor coaching program designed to support what he calls "breast cancer thrivers."

"I had a patient who was doing well for two years and I sent her to the foundation program," he said. "She came in and said she knew something was wrong. Quizzing her, she breaks down. She had not told anyone, not even her relatives. She said, 'The cancer scares me. Every time I get a pain, I think the cancer has come back. So much goes on in these poor ladies heads, it's heartbreaking.'"

Often, patients go through surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, and when it's over, "everything stops -- no one cares anymore," said Gabriel.

Relationship problems set in, divorce rates go up.

When things are going well, a party can be a spirit lifter. Some of his patients with the most virulent cancers set smaller markers for celebrations.

"Very aggressive cancers can recur in the early period, so it's important to set a milestone," he said. "If you reach the five-year mark, you can breathe a bit. But with recurrence high, you can't breathe, you can't relax. Some celebrate at one year."

One of his patients was 26 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and her boyfriend left her. After a lumpectomy she was so worried about the cancer coming back that she had both breasts removed. Now, she is married and planning a family.

"She said that having an anniversary party brought them closer together," said Gabriel.

But, he said, women worry about jinxing their survival.

"It's always in the back of their head," he added.

"I bring this topic up with them," he said. "You are having this party and what if all of a sudden it comes back. Well, if it comes back, they say they will deal with it. It's important they believe in themselves. Cancer takes an emotional toll."

As for Kandel, getting a cancer diagnosis just as she turned 50 stopped her life dead in its tracks.

"I felt on top of my game: I exercise, I don't smoke or drink, and everything was in great shape," she said. "I had just sent my kid off to college."

When the doctor told her the lump was cancer, "I burst into tears," Kandel said. "I didn't know where to go or what to do."

After a lumpectomy she underwent chemotherapy.

"The worst thing was losing my hair," she said. "I had no nausea because now they have great meds ... I felt very lucky."

As each year passed, she remained healthy -- and thankful.

"Every year on my cancer-versary, the day surgery had it taken out of me, I would post something on Facebook," said Kandel. "It feels a little self-indulgent, but I am happy I have passed another year. I know I am going to get warm wishes and people like to celebrate with you. Everyone is so kind and wonderful. I get pages of congratulations, and it makes me feel so good. It's a boost."

As her five-year anniversary approached, she knew it was a "big deal" medically.

"I just wanted to do something to note this day," she said, "and I saw somewhere about gratitude gatherings, and thought, 'That's exactly what I want.'"

On her first year anniversary, Kandel had brought a basket of fuzzy slippers to her doctor's oncologist's office for chemotherapy patients.

"They were afraid people would slip in them, but said they could always use candy," she said. "You get parched when you are sitting there [in chemotherapy] getting bored."

She invited her best girlfriends and told them to bring wrapped hard candy instead of gifts.

"I donated the candy and my gratitude passed on their gratitude and passed it forward," she said. "My friends brought bags and bags."

"We made a few toasts and had a nice time together, it was fun," said Kandel. "It made me feel so good to give something back."

Now, Kandel has created a website, [Breast Cancer Freebies](#), that gathers hundreds of free services for cancer patients and survivors: wigs, hats, scholarships, magazines, retreats, hotlines and much more.

But her own survival is never far from her mind.

"I am still in shock sometimes even when I think I had cancer," she said. "It's that big."