

Speaker 1 ([00:05](#)):

A diagnosis of breast cancer can cause a life changing ripple effect of impact affecting those. We love the most and those upon whom we lean for comfort and strength in the most challenging of times, my name is Ash Hurley, and I'm the CEO of breast cancer Ireland. And you're listening to more than a lump, a podcast that talks openly and honestly, to a selection of guests about their very personal connection to breast cancer, be it through their career choice, their own firsthand experience of the disease, or through sharing the experience of close family members,

Speaker 1 ([00:40](#)):

My conversations, and on how breast cancer has informed their perspective on life, love family health, their goals, and indeed their aspirations. Although each story is utterly unique. The one common thread that runs through each one is that breast cancer is more than a lump Emma's story is one of bravery and hope culminating, much celebrated birth of her beautiful son, Sam in late 2020, but I'll let Emma tell you her own story in her own words. Emma, we're delighted to have you here with us today as a mom of three kids myself, well, adults. Now, it really brings me so much joy to see someone so young, who I met during treatment, looking so vibrant and happy today. It really is so lovely to here. Emma, bring us back to your life prior to June, 2017.

Speaker 2 ([01:27](#)):

Thanks so much for having me. I'm delighted to be here. Um, I suppose my life prior to June, 2017 was pretty average, 30 year old. I mean, I was really happy in my job and still am thankfully. Um, as you said, I'm a secondary school teacher and I absolutely love that in environment. Um, and being around the students and everything. Um, I, you know, would've been quite social with all my friends. Um, I was very fit and very healthy, probably the healthiest I've ever been ironically with, uh, knowing now what was to come just mere months later. But, um, yeah, life was great. And, um, as you said, I had no idea of what was going to come three months later. Yeah.

Speaker 1 ([02:03](#)):

Tell us about reaching the big milestones, sharing your journey on Instagram with your followers at the time one year since diagnosis anniversary, many of our listeners will, will remember how inspiring and positive you were even then. So tell us why you have found this important and particularly in relation to issues around fertility.

Speaker 2 ([02:21](#)):

Um, I suppose the whole Instagram page really came from the fact that I do didn't know anybody else my age, who was diagnosed with breast cancer. Um, so it was kind of my way of reaching out, trying to make some connections. And I made some fabulous friends through that Instagram page that I'm still in contact with. Um, and also I suppose the job I was in, it was important for me, you know, for the students that I teach to see me, that I was still like still doing okay. And kind of the path that I was taking, you know, I was still there for them. Um, but I suppose, yeah, it, it was, it became very important. And the support that I got from people really gave me a boost on the really low days when, you know, sometimes you think, oh, this is so hard.

Speaker 2 ([03:00](#)):

Can I keep going? And someone you, a complete stranger would send you a message and then your whole day you could just turn around. So it was, and still is very special to me. Like, I, I don't actually use the page anymore because, you know, I felt it was like that moment in time, but I never deleted the page. I left it there and all my videos are still up for, you know, somebody is starting out, they can kind of see where I started and I suppose where I am now. So it's still just as important today.

Speaker 1 ([03:24](#)):

And I suppose for listeners, um, your diagnosis was triple negative breast cancer. And, you know, to explain that, to explain that that's a subtype breast cancer that tends to affect younger women. Yeah. And with that, unfortunately, research hasn't come as far down the line as a lot of other subtypes. So the age, the treatment is the age O of chemotherapy surgery and radiation therapy. And with that comes issues in relation to fertility.

Speaker 2 ([03:49](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I did the dreaded thing of, I got my diagnosis and I Googled triple negative, which, you know, to anybody listening to this, who's been diagnosed with triple negative, do not do that because a lot of the statistics are very dated and very old and there's constant research being done and trials being done and, you know, alternative treatments in development. So a lot of that stuff, you know, isn't really as applicable anymore. Um, but yeah, it was quite frightening to see numbers. And then obviously as you, as you alluded to their, uh, fertility issues, um, I later discovered that I was BRCA one positive. Um, I was sent for those tests by the hospital, um, because as you said of the subtype that I had, um, and that test came back as positive, but, um, that obviously had massive implications for my fertility because it meant I had a much higher chance of ovarian cancer as well.

Speaker 2 ([04:37](#)):

Um, and I suppose being in my thirties, you know, your fertility is already kind of dropping year on year and I wasn't in a relationship at the time. And obviously as well, you know, there's, it's up to you, whether you have the surgery, you know, to remove your Philip and tubes and your ovaries, but at the same time, it's not a risk that I was kind of, it was a risk that was constantly in my mind. It was, you know, constantly there that I, you know, I tried to just block out, but yeah, it's, it's definitely something that is very hard to deal with on top of the initial cancer diagnosis

Speaker 1 ([05:09](#)):

And then wow. Baby sound.

Speaker 2 ([05:12](#)):

Right. Yeah, I know it was, it was just incredible. And, um, I met my partner Keith two years post my diagnosis. Um, we kind of met reconnected by chance. I suppose we had known each other from school days and we kind of lost touch over the years, but then, um, we happened to bump into each other at a work in service day and, um, just all happened from there. Um, and then, yeah, baby Sam came into our lives on December, 2020, like just the absolute sunshine and joy. Um, and I just never thought like, and it was going to be a scenario that would happen for me. And, um, I mean, when I was, when I told people I was pregnant, I just could not believe the reaction that I got. I, I think like people were so, you know, everyone kind of came along on the cancer journey with me, like, you know, family, friends, um,

strangers, like who just sent me messages. And then like when people heard that I was pregnant, it was just like, I D know, I just feel like everybody just shared in the joy with me so much. And it has been, I dunno, just a culmination of, you know, a tough few years. And then he was just my present at the end.

Speaker 1 ([06:23](#)):

Absolutely. It was fantastic. And I mean, you talk a lot about how your GP was SIM was absolutely, um, crucial in relation to your diagnosis, because as you say, the only thing you felt was this overwhelming F

Speaker 2 ([06:37](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I honestly hand on heart know that if my GP wasn't so amazing with me, that I could not be, I might not be here right now. And that's a really frightening thought, but the subtype of cancer that I had is so aggressive and can developed so quickly. Um, if that had of gone on, you know, under 10 acted, who knows what stage I could have been at by the time it was the texted, I had one lymph node involved. So thankfully, um, it could have, it could have spread a lot more, but he was so visual with, with me, I think, um, what's so important for me kind of to stress is the importance of great GP, patient relationships. So I think that's what made the difference for me. I've been with, um, my Dr. Dr. Abraham since I was a child and he just really knows me.

Speaker 2 ([07:25](#)):

So when I was coming in saying that I was really tired, he knew that it wasn't just, I'd had a hard week and I was tired. He wants to kind of get to the bottom of, you know, you're young and healthy. You shouldn't really, um, be feeling like this. And just because out sheer, you know, thoroughness from him, he, he was ruling out things from blood tests. You know, he just happened to say, do you check your breasts? And you know, I'll be the first to hold my hands up and say, no, I did not. I was not in my world that this could happen to somebody like me. And I'm sure like lots of people listening or thinking the exact same thing. Um, only that he, for some reason, and I still don't know why he said, I'm gonna just get you and a point in that breast clinic. And two weeks later, that's when everything just kicked off. So it was, it's really just the importance of the relationship was just so amazing for me.

Speaker 1 ([08:12](#)):

And then was it the, the mammogram that showed up something? Or was it the examination that was, that something was, so

Speaker 2 ([08:19](#)):

I had, I had a physical examination, but it, it wasn't in an area that would've been quite obvious. Like, as in, if I had to just, you know, likely check my breast myself, I wouldn't have found it. It was in quite deep. Um, and the doctor was amazing on the day. So he set me straight away for the triple assessment in bone, which is fantastic. Um, so yeah, I had the mammogram done obviously, which I, I had an ultrasound initially. Um, and then they said, oh, we're gonna send you for mammogram, even though, you know, you're a bit younger than we'd usually do it for. Um, and then there was areas that they wanted to biopsy a couple of areas they wanted to biopsy. So I suppose at that point, I thought this isn't maybe the best, but I still was quite naive that I thought, oh, I'm sure everything's fine. But it all kind of escalated very quickly from them within a week. I was diagnosed. So,

Speaker 1 ([09:06](#)):

And tell us about that day. I mean, I know your mom was with you. Yeah. Um, and I've met your mom. She's amazing woman. Yeah. But like on hearing those, that word.

Speaker 2 ([09:16](#)):

Yeah. I mean, it's burned in my memory forever. It's one of those things that I will never forget. I remember everything about that waiting room. I remember like exactly what I was wearing. I remember what the lady in front of me was wearing like little things that you think, how is that still in your mind? But everything was, I know it was just so clear to me. We went in and, um, I've kind of, you know, I've mentioned before that there was a nurse in the room and straight away, I was kind of on edge that, why is there somebody else here? Like, is this, is there a nurse here to console me, is the bad news coming? You know, you just kind of any appointment I'd been to before there was never like a nurse. So, um, professor hill who's incredible know, was pointing out the areas on my scan and you know, my mom just straight up asked him, uh, is this cancer like, does she have cancer?

Speaker 2 ([10:04](#)):

And he said, unfortunately, yes. Like we weren't really upset at that point. I think we were just still stunned because, you know, as much as we were kind of thinking, we're gonna be told something, the hearing the word cancer is just so I know. So shocking. I think it's shocking to anyone any age. You never expect it to be you. Um, and then, yeah, I suppose from that point on, we kind of just listened to what, what he had to say. We tried to take it all in and we just kind of tried to mentally prepare ourselves for what was about to come.

Speaker 1 ([10:35](#)):

And it's very hard for your mom. I mean, no one wants to see their child go through something, something so hard and your treatment, what was your treatment plan like?

Speaker 2 ([10:45](#)):

So about two weeks after the initial diagnosis, I went in and had a double mastectomy at the time. They didn't realize that I was BRCA one, but thankfully we went for the double mastectomy, my surgeon, Mr. Prayer, um, had said that when they had done a repeat scan, that there was some pre-cancer cells in my left breast. And he said it was up to me, whether, you know, I wanted to go for both that, you know, if I was his sister, he would, you know, he knows what option he'd go for. But ultimately it was up to me. I knew going into that appointment already. I wanted both remove, um, again, completely individual decision for ever for anybody, but I just couldn't live with the fear of thinking. What if, what if, what if, and then ultimately it would turn out to be the best decision because the bra, I would've gone back for that surgery anyway. So had the surgery and then recovered well from that, and then had chemotherapy, which finished just for Christmas, a lovely gift to finish off the year. Yeah. Without all that. And then I had four weeks of radiotherapy and then my reconstruction a few months after that.

Speaker 1 ([11:47](#)):

Wow.

Speaker 2 ([11:48](#)):

So yeah, a jam packed year. Yeah. A jam packed year, but I suppose the way I looked at it and the way I would still kind of say to people is I didn't look under at the bigger picture of what was happening. I just, every single week each appointment would just, I think, okay, this is one less appointment that you're gonna have each week is one week closer to the end. So, you know, I feel like if you look at the whole treatment plan, it's so overwhelming to save to someone. Okay. So you're gonna have this surgery, this chemo, this meant chemotherapy, this much radiotherapy, this, you know, your brain would explode

Speaker 1 ([12:19](#)):

By sizes,

Speaker 2 ([12:20](#)):

Breaking it down and then celebrate each little kind of achievement that you do. You know, that's all the little milestones. Yeah. All the little milestones. Cause then they add up to the end, which is wonderful.

Speaker 1 ([12:28](#)):

Absolutely. So Emma Day by day and week by week, at what point does the severity of what you've been through hit you?

Speaker 2 ([12:39](#)):

Um, well I think for me, I definitely found the aftermath of all of the treatment, more difficult than the treatment itself, which I know sounds like crazy to say, because obviously your body has just been battered and take like taken through such a wild journey. But, um, um, I suppose in some way, like all of the appointments you had and, you know, that was kind of a safety net for me, that once you're still being treated and once you're still seeing all the doctors like you're okay, and anything that comes up will be caught or could be seen. So when you're out of that, like you get, you know, each week you're seeing less as people and each month you're seeing less as people. I kind of struggled with that. Um, you know, people think once you finish your physical treatment that, you know, you're cancer free, you're better now and that's it.

Speaker 2 ([13:24](#)):

But I feel like that couldn't be further from the truth. And, you know, from friends that I have, um, who've been through the same thing. I know they feel the exact same way. And you know, you're trying so hard not to you kind of worry about every Niall and every pain and put it outta your head, but you know, those fears do live on. And I think, you know, it's always something that you, you, you just kind of have to try and learn to live with, you know, through various ways. And you know, myself getting involved with breast cancer Ireland has definitely been a massive help for me to, you know, channel all my energy in that way into, into, um, a positive cause. But, you know, life has also been so wonderful after and, you know, from terrible situations, like really incredible things can happen. Um, so yeah, it's been, life has been interesting since definitely different, but better. And I actually wouldn't change the journey I've been on, been on because of what I have now.

Speaker 1 ([14:17](#)):

Absolutely. Well, you have Keith and you have lovely baby Sam. I do. And tell us a little bit about Keith.

Speaker 2 ([14:23](#)):

So Keith and I actually were in school together. He was in the local boys school and I was in the local girl school and we actually went on a school trip together and we just became friends. And when we got back from the trip and we were still friends, um, but over the, the years, of course, you know, we kind of lost touch. We were in different colleges, he lived abroad. And then, um, didn't obviously give too much thought I was going through what I was going through and he was in a different country. Um, but yeah, we, Keith ended up retraining and going back to become a teacher and one day at an inservice, um, we bumped into each other in the break room. We like there was no rhyme or reason as to why that happened because we don't teach the same subjects.

Speaker 2 ([15:02](#)):

We weren't, you know, in the same conference room together or anything like that. So Fay just brought us back together. And, um, from there, you know, we just developed and he was very sensitive to my situation. Um, it helped a lot that, because we still would've had mutual friends, he would've heard kind of what had happened. So there was never a big kind of drama around, you know, my illness. Um, because you know, some people can be, you don't know how people are gonna take illness. Some people don't deal well with illness. They don't want to be around illness. They can't cope with somebody being ill. So, you know, being, you know, a woman out, a single woman out in her thirties, um, you just don't know kind of what you're gonna get or you don't know kind of, oh, how am I gonna have to go through this ordeal again?

Speaker 2 ([15:47](#)):

Am I gonna have to explain all these things? And, but I didn't. And he was just in credible, he didn't care about it at all. He, you know, was just comfortable to go my pace in terms of like what I was comfortable open up to him about. Um, and yeah, he was just wonderful. And then as he said, um, Sam came along, but, you know, um, to get to that point, you know, he did have to have some really tough and quite early on in the relationship, I did have to say to him, you know, I have this gene, you know, this means I'm gonna have to get particular type of surgery. Um, and it's probably going to be soothed sooner rather than later, because, you know, as I said, of higher risk of another cancer, um, so, you know, there is a chance that, you know, a and children won't be on the cards for us.

Speaker 2 ([16:35](#)):

Um, and I know like saying that to somebody, you know, that could make somebody run for the Hills, you know, well, you know, that's that wouldn't interest some people. Um, but he was just, I couldn't have asked for a lovely response. He just was like, I don't, I don't, that doesn't matter to me, you know, I'm in this relationship with you, you, if we have children great, if we don't, you know, we can still have a lovely life. Just the two of us, you know, we're happy just the two of us. And I think that's, you know, the point when I knew that, you know, we were going to stay together and, you know, this, he was just brought into my life at just the perfect time. And like even talking about it makes me feel really emotional because, you know, if I said all this, when I say this to him, he just kind of laughs it off. I don't think he fully realizes that, you know, he really just helps turn my life completely around in terms of just like lifted me up when I needed it. And, um, yeah. And then thankfully Sam was our little bit, our little miracle just

before Christmas until any 20. And yeah, I just never thought that this would be the life that I'd get just so grateful every single day for it. Cause I know not everybody gets to have it.

Speaker 1 ([17:42](#)):

It's a really, really lovely story of hope, you know, it's fantastic. And I suppose you looking at life now, what would you tell your students, your, you know, your, the girls and guys that you know about, you know, the importance of understanding, good breast health there you were in your thirties without a care in the world about anything like breast cancer. Yeah. And yet you were diagnosed, what would you tell those younger school kids?

Speaker 2 ([18:07](#)):

So I'm very vocal in my school with, in terms of my story, you know, pretty much every, every child in the school knows that I've had breast cancer, that I'm an ambassador for breast cancer Ireland. And, you know, the girls would be great at the little fundraisers and helping raise an awareness. And we actually have, um, a breast cancer board in our school now, um, that has lots of messages and has, you know, the, um, leaflet with the eight times and symptoms. And we actually had Olivia in given a talk to our T Y, um, which was so important to me to have, you know, Olivia such a special friend and Denise and Georgie and all the girls. Um, and I suppose for the kids to, you know, have that intervention at 15, 16 years of age, I just wanted come a normal part of their lives that they don't even think twice.

Speaker 2 ([18:52](#)):

They have, you know, once a month in the share or wherever they have their check. And then that's just another thing they do. It's just, it's not a big ordeal. It's just something they do. And, you know, they might tell their sisters, their moms, their aunties, and then it just becomes ingrained. You know, each generation that comes up, it just becomes part of their life. And then as you know, or it just section is really what saves lives. So the younger, we can kind of get the kids, checking themselves, the sooner things are picked up and then, you know, lots of people might have to go through all of that treatment, you know, as chemotherapy is, you know, way down now for people, it doesn't always have to end in chemotherapy. Um, so yeah, that, it's really important to me as well as a teacher, especially that the kids are aware.

Speaker 1 ([19:31](#)):

And I suppose that's one of the key, um, remits within breast cancer Ireland while our major one is that we support research and we seek to try and advance the disease into a treatable long term minimalist, but also to provide that education and awareness on the importance of good breast health. And, you know, we offer the complimentary program. Like you say, to go into schools, talk to the teachers, talk to T talk, to come companies and community groups, because it's important for, for women and indeed men to understand what's normal and to understand how to do a proper breast examination. And to know that there are eight signs and symptoms, you know, it is like the podcast. It is more than a

Speaker 2 ([20:05](#)):

Alone and, and it really does help because our lovely jail as well from breast cancer Ireland, you know, for, I, her lump from, from a talk from Adrian, who's one of the coordinators. So it really like firsthand experience. Like we know that this works. And, um, like as I said earlier, like I know that every outcome

isn't a happy one and, you know, we've lost some amazing people and some beautiful friends, like our wonderful Orla. Yeah. And you know, if any of these, you know, outreach programs or any of the research that we're doing, you know, can help one person like, you know, um, can have one person to, you know, get that early detection and save their life than anything that we do is worth it.

Speaker 1 ([20:49](#)):

Absolutely. Absolutely. We had an interesting feedback from a session we did in a school, um, before Christmas, where, and I always call the T pupils, nearly my social ambassadors because they go home with the shower card, they talk to mom, to granny, to aunties or to sisters. And one particular, a lady contacted the school afterwards and said only that my daughter came home with that shower card, I would never have known. And I have just had a double mastectomy as a result. I can't thank you enough. So awareness does save lives.

Speaker 2 ([21:19](#)):

It does. It really does like just the power of, you know, each person telling two or three people and just passing the message on it's just, yeah, it's just really, really important.

Speaker 1 ([21:28](#)):

Well, Emma, thank you so much for being with us today. You are a beacon of hope and light and love, and I know you and Keith have are engaged. Now we are and about to go down the aisle. So congratulations on that. Thanks so much. And thanks million for coming. Thanks for having

Speaker 2 ([21:41](#)):

Me.

Speaker 1 ([21:42](#)):

The information in this podcast is based on the personal stories of those. We have chatted to. If you are concerned in any way, please contact your GP immediately, or you can contact us at breast cancer, ireland.com.