

And so it goes: Ellerbee shares her breast-cancer battle

Only dead fish swim upstream," said the woman with the short crop of brunette hair addressing a capacity crowd filling the ballroom of The Four Seasons Hotel, Newport Beach. She was delighted to have the short crop of hair. In her own words, she is "a victor, not just a survivor of breast cancer."

She is **Linda Ellerbee**, journalist, author, lecturer, producer, raconteur, wonder woman of the 1990s. By the time she finished her chat with some 600 dedicated supporters of Hoag Cancer Center's Circle 1000, a record \$250,000 was raised. All 600 wanted to rush the stage and hug Linda Jane Ellerbee. Her candor, her wit, charmed the socks off the sophisticated crowd.

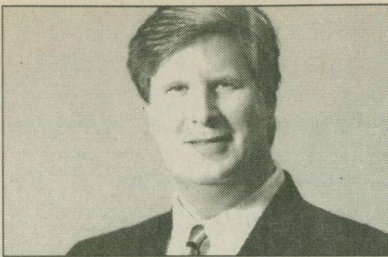
Ellerbee confided that the diagnosis of her breast cancer was personally devastating. The treatment was worse. "I threw up. I lost my hair. I lived," she said in her authoritative style. Her cancer story has been well documented in the media. "At first, I wanted it kept private. It was nobody's business. My colleagues honored my wishes.

"Then one day the phone rang and it was a reporter from USA Today. He told me that the paper was running with my story the next day. Did I wish to comment?" Before she could respond, the reporter informed her that everyone in the industry knew that "she had both of her tits cut off. It was no secret."

A gasp of horror spread throughout the hotel ballroom. It wasn't due to Ellerbee's direct usage of the reporter's language. The insensitivity, not just of the reporter, but of so many people faced with confronting a woman with breast cancer was the issue.

"Breasts are a big deal in America," continued Ellerbee. "When a woman loses her breasts, it is as if her femininity is in question. It is the same for a man with AIDS. His masculinity is in question." Because Americans are so attached to their sexual identity, and that identity is so narrowly defined, often only by the size or in the case of a

THE CROWD



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breast cancer survivor, the very existence of an organ, the issue is often kept secret. The secret is deadly.

Ellerbee is one of the lucky ones. Breast cancer has been on the rise since the 1940s. The numbers are horrific, and scientists do not really have an explanation. Fifty years ago, one in 20 women was diagnosed with breast cancer. Today, it is nearly one in six or seven. "Today, I owe a debt to USA Today for printing my story. The anger was replaced by thousands of letters that poured in from women around the nation. That mail actually sustained me through one of the darkest periods of my life."

Laughter has been another of the sustaining factors in Ellerbee's life. She had insisted that her grown daughter, a music student in Seattle, not fly east for her surgery and miss school. "I'll spend time with you over summer vacation," said Ellerbee. She'll never forget her daughter's reaction seeing her mother that summer. "I was in my bathroom standing in front of the mirror ... no hair from the chemotherapy and no breasts. There I was putting on lipstick when my daughter came in. 'Oh my God, Mother,' she screams. 'You look like Buddha ... without the wisdom.'"

On another occasion, Ellerbee was walking her golden retriever. As she tossed the dog a ball, one of her prostheses fell out and the dog grabbed the breast and ran down the street. Ellerbee ran

after shouting, "give me my breast" at the top of her lungs. Finally, she sat down on the curb and howled at the absurdity of life. "I am a better person today for having had cancer. Oh, I know how that sounds. But I really mean it. Change can be a force of hope. I'm happier than I have ever been."

As the conservative Newport crowd chuckled at the journey of this '60s child (with a brain) from Houston, Texas, it became crystal clear to all that they were in the presence of a person of considerable depth. In her words, a person who is not good at the word "obey."

For a time, Ellerbee was a rising national star at NBC. "But I don't look like all the other people on TV. I look more like all the people who watch TV ... which is just fine by me," offered the ever disarming journalist in a private moment. Does she ever look at Dianne Sawyer or Jane Pauley and say, "That could be me?" She says "No." Instead, she offers that a part of her misses the excitement of the news rush. Making a wonderful special on an important topic or world event is very exciting, very gratifying. "But then I remember why I left. The trade off is not worth the rush."

Ellerbee's time as a network journalist was at the very end of the period when TV news was not expected to be profitable. It was considered the mortgage payment by the network for the right to air and profit from the entertainment side of the business. In the past decade or so, that concept has changed. News is now not only expected to pay for itself, it is expected to be profitable. Further, the infusion of the entertaining tabloid formats such as "Hard Copy," "Inside Edition" and all the talk hosts from Rivera to Jones to Lake, have blurred the line between journalism and enter-



Speaker Linda Ellerbee is flanked by Pat McFarland (left) and brunch chairwoman Arden Flamson.

tainment.

It is a line Ellerbee refuses to cross. "All those shows are not journalism. People used to turn to their network news because they trusted the information. Today, the national media is so busy working its butt off to be centrist ... or populist, to compete with all the non-news disguised as news filling the airwaves, that the information is turning to vanilla. People say that there is a liberal bias in the media. This is not really the case. If there is any kind of bias, it is the bias of appealing to the largest mass audience, motivated by the dollar profit from ratings revenue."

Ellerbee came to Newport Beach to address the Hoag Cancer Center. She was not on a notional book tour, or promoting

her acclaimed TV news for children on the Nickelodeon Network. Her only goal was to share her experience.

"I have learned that what I need is some sort of balance in my life. I will never be a workaholic again. Perhaps the cancer did this to me. Perhaps it is just maturity. I'm proud and happy to be 50. I love my man, my children ... gosh I even like my children, and I've found a physical and spiritual rush from walking in the woods. Can you imagine ... a 50-year-old woman who has discovered camping!" Ellerbee added, "I can assure you I will not be on my deathbed lamenting that I did not spend more time at the office."

Sandy Sewell chaired the Ellerbee event with Arden Flam-

son, who delivered a most distinguished and generous introduction of the speaker. **Judy Steele** chaired the underwriting, and a Circle 1000 committee included; **Hyla Berteau, Pat Cox, Jodi Greenbaum, Nora Johnson, Sharon Pettis, Virginia Zenz, Ginny Ueberroth** and **Frances Applegate**. Spotted in the crowd; **Judie Argyros, Lillian Fluor, Charley and Nora Hester, Richard and Lynette Berg, Pat McFarland** and **Sue Winn**.

What does Linda Jane Ellerbee hope to be doing at age 60?

"Living on the water in Newport Beach and going to The Four Seasons Hotel to listen to somebody else make a speech."

• B.W. Cook's column appears Thursdays and Saturdays.

