

Nonprofits join forces to help cancer survivors with fertility preservation

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At 31 years old, Alice Crisci was diagnosed with breast cancer.

The Redondo Beach resident bared it all in a photo shoot with the Daily Breeze back in 2008 before undergoing a double mastectomy.

The photos were a celebration of her body before cancer would change it forever. The newspaper continued to follow her journey, including her decision to ensure that after remission she'd have a chance at realizing her dream of becoming a mother.

"I learned very early on in the process that my fertility would be at risk, that there was a 50/50 chance I'd be left infertile," says Crisci, now 35. "And that was a chance I wasn't willing to take."

So Crisci went through fertility preservation, a process that cost her \$20,000 and had to be paid in full that day. Not qualifying for financial assistance, she charged the entire amount on her American Express card.

It was at that moment she realized her life mission.

Crisci immediately started a nonprofit called My Vision Foundation. Since then, it's been renamed Fertile Action, but the goal remains the same: to raise awareness and provide financial assistance for fertility preservation for those affected by cancer.

Crisci now lives in Castle Rock, Colo., but on June 14 she will return to Los Angeles as Fertile Action hosts a gala to raise awareness and funds. At the event, the organization will officially announce its alliance with fertility expert Mindy Berkson.

Berkson founded the infertility consultancy firm Lotus Blossom Consulting, through which she established the Jude Andrew Adams Charitable Fund to help fund fertility cycles for financially needy couples.

The women are aligning their organizations to further raise awareness of the importance of fertility preservation in patients who have been diagnosed with cancer.

"I think it is so important that at the first diagnosis oncologists begin to talk to their patients in the reproductive ages about fertility preservation and point them to the right resources, to really help them understand and explore their options," Berkson says.

Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation can affect the ability of both men and women to reproduce. The amount of risk depends on the patient's age, which drugs are used in treatment, dose of radiation, and duration of treatment, according to the National Cancer Institute.

Unlike Crisci, who was told of the infertility possibility as soon as she was diagnosed, the NCI says that only half of patients of childbearing age are informed of the risk.

The opportunity to preserve fertility might not be possible for all patients, such as those who can't afford to delay treatment because their cancer is too advanced.

But Crisci says most women have a four- to six-week window before they start treatment, a time that can be used to explore fertility preservation.

And for those people, there are options.

Men can bank sperm. Women can freeze their ovaries, eggs or embryos created by a partner's sperm or a sperm

donor.

Drugs, such as those used in traditional in-vitro fertilization, are prescribed to stimulate the ovaries to produce as many eggs as possible so there's a significant supply to freeze, increasing chances of success later on.

Sadly, Crisci has been unable to make it through a successful pregnancy on her own, having miscarried three times. She and her fiancé were preparing to use the 14 embryos and 11 eggs she froze before her cancer treatment when they found out Crisci has a polyp on her uterus that needs to be removed before they can begin the process.

Unfortunately, the eggs she froze only have a 2 percent to 3 percent chance of working because they were frozen with old technology. Newer technology has increased success rates.

"The national averages for embryo freezing are about a 40 percent success rate. Egg freezing does now rival embryo freezing success rates, but that's for women who are especially under the age of 27 but for sure under the age of 35," Crisci says.

"And they vary from clinic to clinic and it's still a new technology. The vitrification, the fast-freezing method of the eggs, is much better technology than my eggs, the way that they were frozen, and not every clinic does it."

If a woman has already gone through treatment and is infertile, options include egg donation or a surrogate to carry eggs and sperm from any combination of intended mother, intended father, donor egg or donor sperm.

But no matter the situation, all of the options are costly.

On average, an IVF cycle ranges from \$12,000 to \$18,000; using an egg donor costs an additional \$12,000 to \$15,000 and a surrogate can tack on an additional \$40,000 to \$50,000, says Berkson.

And depending on the plan, insurance benefits are limited.

But together Berkson and Crisci are working to eradicate those costs for cancer patients and cancer survivors.

Currently, Fertile Action has a network of egg-freezing physicians in 12 states that offer fee-reduced services for cancer patients. People can apply for financial aid at www.fertileaction.org.

"When I went through this I vowed, I just knew in my heart, I would make it my life's mission to make sure that no one else had to put a \$20,000 expense on their American Express card," Crisci says. "Or that money would ever prevent anyone from actualizing their dream of parenthood."

And now, with the collaboration of Fertile Action and Berkson's organizations, they are taking more steps toward that mission.

In addition to those reduced fees, they will soon be offering a cash grant program to further offset costs. The program will be officially announced at next week's gala.

Cancer patients and cancer survivors can apply for the grant online. Applicants are required to write a letter to their future child and to provide letters of recommendation and proof of medical clearance and financial need, among other things.

The first grantee will be named in September. Because of the time delay, the cash grant will likely go to a cancer survivor to further offset costs of egg donation or surrogacy.

If it was up to them, they would help everyone, Berkson and Crisci say. But what they really want people to know is that whether you're recently diagnosed or a cancer survivor, there is hope.

"The statistics of the number of women getting breast cancer or other cancers at very early ages is overwhelming and with early detection the cure rates for these patients have increased to 98 percent," Berkson says.

"So with such hopeful success and such advanced treatment options, there's so much hope to preserve fertility that I hate to see a woman who's 30 years old, basically a woman like Alice, not have options to preserve her future.

"And I think it's that key piece of information and education that is so important for young women who are diagnosed with cancer."

Stephanie Cary