

# 'My family's cancer inspired a new musical'

As she watched her niece, Sarah, walk down the aisle, Karen Restaino couldn't have felt any happier. 'She looked absolutely gorgeous in her wedding dress,' says Karen. 'It was a perfect day.'

But Sarah's special day was also tinged with sadness because, just a few months before, she had been diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 27. And now, the day after her wedding she was going into hospital for a double mastectomy.

'Seeing this beautiful young blushing bride and knowing she was about to undergo major surgery was a lot to take in,' Karen admits. Thankfully, the wedding went off without a hitch, and the surgery was a success.

However, Sarah wasn't the only woman in Karen's family to be facing this brutal but potentially life saving surgery. Sarah's mum and Karen's sister, Dawn, was also about to undergo a double mastectomy as all the women in Sarah's family had recently been told that they were at high risk of developing breast cancer.

'It all started when Sarah found a painful lump in her breast,' Karen explains. 'Initially, she was told by doctors that it couldn't be cancer as cancer isn't painful.'

Thankfully, Sarah persevered, and, following a biopsy, her fears were confirmed – she did have breast cancer. Further results showed that she had the BRCA1 gene, which increases the risk of breast, ovarian and prostate cancer.

This terrible news came as a huge shock to everyone. 'As far as I knew, neither my mum nor my grandparents had developed breast cancer, or ever mentioned the BRCA gene,' Karen says. 'We didn't have a family history of cancer.'

Feeling concerned, Karen decided to push for testing herself. 'The doctor told me I had nothing to be concerned about and that Sarah's cancer was just a fluke,' she says.

Nevertheless, Sarah's oncologist agreed to test the whole family. Karen's daughters, Romina and Sophie\* and her sons Max and Don were all tested when they each reached the appropriate age, alongside Dawn's other three daughters.

After a few weeks of anxious waiting, the test results came back. All of the women in Karen's family were BRCA gene carriers, and it had come from the paternal side of the family. 'Doctors said that our odds of developing cancer with this gene would be as high as 50-50,' Karen adds.

As the devastating news sunk in, the women had to face the harsh reality that double mastectomies could be their best bet at preventing cancer.

'Dawn, Sarah and I immediately decided to undergo double mastectomies,' says Karen. The three of them have since had their operations. 'My eldest, Sophie, also decided to follow suit shortly after and have a double mastectomy too, but Romina waited until she was older.'

To help take her mind off life-changing surgery and treatment, Karen threw herself into writing her first book, *The Ringmaster*. 'Not long after it was published, a local radio station called me in for an interview about my book,' she explains.

But when she sat down for a quick chat with her interviewer, Becky Measures, she was in for a surprise.

'Becky said she knew my son, Max. He's a musician and he'd performed at her charity events over the years. When I asked what her charity was, she said it was The National Hereditary Breast Cancer Helpline. I was stunned at the coincidence,' says Karen.

It turned out that her mum, Wendy Watson, had the BRCA1 gene too – and had been the first patient in the UK to request a preventative double mastectomy.

At the time, it was a controversial procedure as the genetic risk factor

Karen Restaino, 57, has found a unique way to spread a life-saving message

'We didn't have any family history'

'It's important to raise awareness'



The show is being trialled by performers

hadn't yet been discovered. When she was just 24, Becky followed in her mum's footsteps and underwent a double mastectomy too, making her the youngest in the UK at that time.

'Doctors told Wendy not to be silly, as it wasn't hereditary. But her surgery was pioneering and it received a lot of attention in the press,' Karen adds. 'Without Wendy, my family and I might not have been so able to have mastectomies ourselves and reduce our risk of developing cancer.'

After chatting with Becky, Karen felt deeply inspired. 'I spoke to Max and told him all about Wendy. I realised I wanted to make more people aware of the BRCA gene too and came up with the idea of putting together a musical as a great way to inform people, but in an entertaining way.'

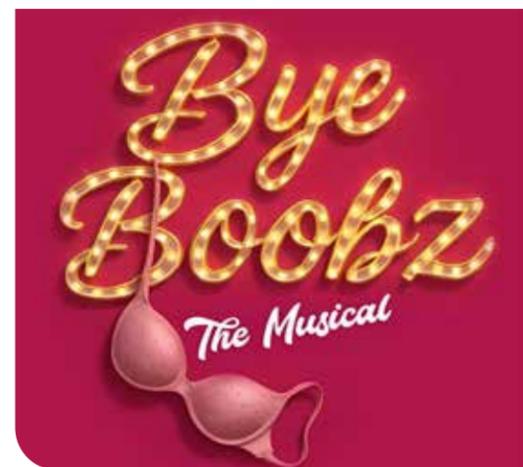
Max loved the idea and they quickly got to work, with Karen doing the writing and Max creating the music. They called their musical, *Bye-Bye Boobz*.

The storyline was based largely on Wendy and her pioneering work, but with some humour thrown in.

'We've worked with actors, directors and choreographers to lift the musical from the page to the stage,' says Karen. 'We've trialled a couple of performances and, while it's still a work in progress, it's been received well so far,' she adds.

They've even had some celebrities show interest, including Miriam Margolyes and Tony Christie, for one of the show's songs, *Check Your Boobs*.

Now, Karen is hoping to get funding so that her breast cancer musical can be brought to life on stage this autumn.



'I feel it's important to raise awareness of the BRCA gene in a way that doesn't terrify people,' she says. 'And if our show can help catch cancer before it's too late, while putting a smile on people's faces, that would be great.'

■ To find out more about the musical, visit [maxrestaino.com](http://maxrestaino.com). For more about BRCA, visit [breastcancerogenetics.co.uk](http://breastcancerogenetics.co.uk)



Max and Karen with Tony Christie