

# 'The most I can offer my daughter is life'

Temple Israel to screen *Dear Talula* on Sept. 14

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"It's so strange how life can change in an instant."

That was a tough lesson that filmmaker Lori Benson learned when she was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 38. And with a family history of the disease, Benson knew that her Jewish heritage could be a contributing factor to her condition.

"Historically, we've had to hide our identity to survive on some level," Benson told the AJW. "There are so many periods of history where people denounced their Judaism, secretly prayed, but had to convert to live. What made me think is that you can do all those things, but you can't change your DNA. You can't change your genetics."

Benson chronicled her experience with breast cancer, including a mastectomy and six months of chemotherapy, in the film *Dear Talula*. The film will be screened 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 14 at Temple Israel, 2324 Hennepin Ave. S., Minneapolis.

It will be followed by a panel discussion with an oncologist, psychiatrist, geneticist and rabbi, who will address some of the issues raised in the film, and be moderated by local radio personality and cancer survivor Kevyn Burger.

Sharsheret, a national organization designed to provide support to young Jewish women diagnosed with breast cancer, will host an informational table at the screening.

Benson's journey began when her doctor's office called about the results of a recent mammogram in January 2003.

"They said, pretty coldly, 'You've got to come in, we think you have breast cancer,'" Benson said.

Her husband, Jonathan, himself a filmmaker, half-jokingly asked if he should bring along a camera. Though she initially refused, a camera did begin following Benson the next day.

"In a way, the story of what happened is very much connected to the story of making this film," Benson said.

At the end of the first 10 days following her diagnosis, Benson had 20 hours of footage, which she intended to edit into a message for her then 18-month-old daughter, Talula. But with the help of family and friends, Benson kept filming. Three years later she had accumulated more than 100 hours of footage, which she edited into the final 34-minute film.

"I decided to extract, in the tightest way possible, the essence of the experience and the essence of what it meant to me, what I learned," Benson said. "This film is about

sentimentality, which was her way of coping, but the film is no less moving.

It is infused with Benson's personality and includes a lot of humor, especially when she brings a copy of *Playboy* to her plastic surgeon's office, or tells of the amount of money she spent on alternative healing methods.

Touching moments, however, like her friends' healing circle or the last time she breastfeeds, remind us that we travel these life journeys alone.

Ultimately, Benson's film reminds us that life goes on and her future lies within Talula.

"The most I can offer my daughter is life," Benson says in the film.



Courtesy of Lori Benson

Lori Benson, pictured above with her daughter, Talula, chronicled her life after a breast cancer diagnosis in the award-winning documentary *Dear Talula*. The film will be screened on Sept. 14 at Temple Israel in Minneapolis.

being a woman, being a young mother, going through the experience with humor. It's showing [Talula] and maybe other people who see it how someone like me went through this experience."

But Benson also wanted to demystify breast cancer and avoid the experience that her grandmother endured 60 years ago.

"My grandmother had [cancer] young," Benson said. "In those days, a mastectomy was not what it is today. She lived with a scar — I remember this stuffed bra pad — and a tremendous amount of shame, and a marriage that really suffered because of it... It was just nothing you talked about."

Benson said she became an artist in the editing room and made every word and every frame count. She stripped away the

experienced a recurrence two and a half years ago. Today, she is healthy.

She will speak after the film's screening, and Talula will be on hand to help distribute literature.

"I don't know that if I hadn't made the film, how I would remember my breast cancer story," Benson said. "When you're diagnosed, suddenly you're receiving... I've received so much and now I get to give back. And I get the extra added benefit of the film as a tool to do it. I can tell the story, but I can show the story."

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For information on the film, visit: [www.deartalula.com](http://www.deartalula.com).

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