



A MOTHER'S LEGACY

Irvington woman acts to reduce her risk of the cancer that took her own mom

Heather Salerno | The Journal News

On this Mother's Day, Allison Gilbert of Irvington will celebrate with her family the same way she always does.

She'll get breakfast in bed and hand-made cards from her husband, Mark Weintraub, and their children, Jake, who's 8, and Lexi, who's almost 6.

But the holiday will be different in one way, a way that Jake and Lexi are too young to understand.

For the first Mother's Day since having her kids, Gilbert isn't gripped by constant worry that her next doctor's appointment will bring the cancer diagnosis she's dreaded all her adult life. She's no longer preoccupied with dying young, as both her parents did.

That's because six months ago, Gilbert had an operation to remove her ovaries and most of her reproductive organs. The elective procedure sent her into menopause at 37, but it also drastically reduced her odds of getting cancer.

"I feel like life with my children is far more possible than I ever did before," she

says. "I feel a renewed sense of vitality and energy and optimism, and a sense that we will have Mother's Days far into the future."

Gilbert knows how painful it is to lose a parent. She'd lost both of hers by the time she was 31.

Her mother, Lynn, died of ovarian cancer in 1996. Five years later, her father, Sidney, died of lung cancer.

At high risk of developing the disease herself, Gilbert vowed that her family wouldn't lose her if she could help it.

"I feel like my surgery was really a Mommy decision," she says. "I really feel if I could ensure that I'd be

around for my kids as long as humanly possible, this was a form of ensuring our future together. Ensuring I'd be there for them when they graduate elementary school, when they run off to high school, when they get married. I felt like this was my insurance card."

"Life just seems that much more precious when you're a mom, because you're responsible for these two unbelievable people. And because I know how hard it is to lose your parents, how could I not have the surgery?"

Please see MOTHER, 10E



Stephen Schmitt/The Journal News
Allison Gilbert plays with her son, Jake, 8, on the living-room floor of their Irvington home.

Dylan's ex recounts historic era

A former girlfriend details 1960s life with then-rising star

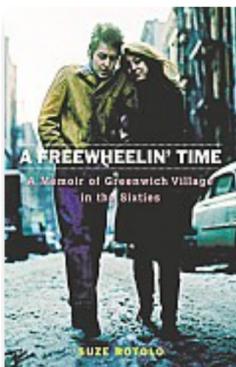
Josh Getlin
Los Angeles Times

On a snowy day in 1963, Suze Rotolo snuggled with Bob Dylan as the two walked down a Greenwich Village street to make an album cover.

"The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" went on to become one of his best-known records, but the long-haired girl on his arm was always a mystery.

Now, Rotolo has broken her silence to tell the story of what it was like to fall in love with Bob Dylan at 17, to introduce him to civil rights politics and modern poetry and to finally break up with him when the pressures of his stardom became too great.

Her new book, "A Freewheelin'



Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties" (Broadway, \$22.95, 384 pages) offers a revealing glimpse of the young artist, whom she calls with understatement "an elephant in the room of

my life." "People will always identify Suze as the girl on the album cover, and she's lived with this since 1963, but that's not the reason to read her book," said Sean Wilentz, a Princeton University professor and historian-in-residence at Dylan's official Web site.

"She evokes a time and place out of which a good deal of contemporary American culture sprang. It was a time of great freedom, when people were figuring out what they want to be, but freedom is scary."

During their four-year relationship, Rotolo deeply loved Dylan, who was 20 when they met.

She was there when classic songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" were new. She looked on with pride, then fear, as celebrity transformed him and other women pursued him.

The author finally decided it was

Please see ROTOLO, 10E



File/The Journal News
Dori Berinstein of Bedford Corners has produced the documentary "Gotta Dance."

Hip-hop moves, but not with broken hips

Robin Givhan
The Washington Post

There's something immediately amusing about the sight of a senior citizen dressed in an over-size basketball jersey and executing hip-hop dance moves. It's the classic fish-out-of-water giggle.

Dori Berinstein's documentary "Gotta Dance" evokes a lot of laughter because it follows a group of senior citizens as they audition and join a hip-hop dance troupe organized by the New Jersey Nets basketball team.

The movie premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and was greeted with loud whoops and a standing ovation — situations in which they are graceful and self-assured. The dancers

type that old people just aren't cool.

The hip-hopping seniors were in the audience, screening the movie about their beginnings for the first time, and wearing their red-and-white jerseys emblazoned with their age. They may have been laughing hardest of all, as they try to figure out exactly what makes them "old" — an adjective they themselves use — and what that even means.

Berinstein, a Broadway producer-turned-filmmaker who lives in Bedford Corners, shrewdly alleviates any sense of uneasiness about whether it's okay to laugh at the senior dancers as they struggle with hip-hop choreography.

She shows them in other situations in which they are graceful and self-assured. The dancers

Please see BERINSTEIN, 5E

On the web

View Kevin Canfield's "Movie Watch" on LoHud.com/video.



A tough choice, a bright outlook

MOTHER, from 1E

Ever since her mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, when Gilbert was in her early 20s, she's known that she'd eventually get her ovaries removed.

Her doctors urged her to have the prophylactic, or preventive, procedure after she was done having children, and before turning 40. Gilbert was told 40 was the "magic number," the age when statistics show that the risk for those prone to ovarian and breast cancers skyrockets.

But back then, she was a recent college graduate. She'd met Mark, but they weren't married yet. She hadn't yet established herself as an award-winning TV news producer and author. Motherhood and middle age seemed like a lifetime away.

"It didn't even register," says Gilbert.

It's not as if she ignored the situation, though. Far from it.

Gilbert says she was "militant" about her cancer surveillance, enlisting "an army" of doctors, including a breast cancer specialist and a gynecologic oncologist. Every year, she'd get routine breast exams, plus sonograms, MRIs, mammograms and transvaginal ultrasounds.

"I had a cancer team when I don't even have cancer," she says.

Yet once Lexi was born — and Gilbert and her husband decided that they weren't having more than two children — she began to wonder more about her odds.

So Gilbert decided to undergo genetic testing. She wanted to find out if she had inherited a mutation in certain genes — called BRCA1 and BRCA2 — that make women more susceptible to developing breast and other types of cancer.

She remembers exactly when she received the results: March 12, 2003. She was 32. And she was positive for BRCA1.

Even though the result wasn't much of a surprise, Gilbert was destroyed by the news.

"I think what was so emotional was that it went from a theoretical, expected high risk to an indisputable, concrete, on paper [fact]," she says.

According to the National Cancer Institute, about 13 percent of all women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime, compared with estimates of 36 to 85 percent of women who have an altered BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene. It's also estimated that 1.7 percent of women will get ovarian cancer,

compared with 16 to 60 percent of those with mutated BRCA genes.

Despite Gilbert's family history of ovarian cancer, she actually runs a higher risk of developing breast cancer. Her lifetime risk of breast cancer was determined to be up to 85 percent, as well as up to 60 percent for ovarian cancer.

Gilbert could have considered a prophylactic mastectomy to reduce



Support and a book for parentless parents

The reason Irvington's Allison Gilbert underwent elective surgery was to reduce her risk of getting ovarian and other cancers, which she worried would leave her two young children without a mother.

She knows the pain of losing a parent all too well, having lost both of hers to cancer by the time she was 31. To deal with that grief, Gilbert wrote "Always Too Soon," (2006) interviewing others who also experienced this double loss.

That grew into the national support group, Parentless Parents, since fear of dying young affects the way "adult orphans" parent their own children. To find out more about this group — which has a Westchester and New York City chapter — go to www.parentlessparents.com.

her chance of breast cancer, but at the time, she was focused on her ovaries. She says that was partly because of her mother's experience, and partly because ovarian cancer is more deadly.

The overall five-year survival rate for breast cancer is over 88 percent, compared to 45 percent for ovarian cancer. The difference, experts say, is due largely to the fact that breast cancer is easier to detect in early stages.

Plus, there's an added benefit to the ovarian surgery: It also reduces the risk of breast cancer by up to 50 percent.

"Although removing the ovaries is primarily done to reduce the risk of ovarian cancer, it does reduce breast cancer significantly, and that's a great thing," says Karen Brown, director of cancer genetic counseling program at Mount Sinai Hospital, who was Gilbert's counselor.

Still, Gilbert was in her early 30s at the time. Turning 40 was years away.

She didn't get scared into action until the summer.

That was when a routine pelvic ultrasound didn't turn out quite right. Her doctor said it was nothing to worry about, but he wanted her to have a follow-up in three months.

Gilbert worked herself into a frenzy. She knew she couldn't wait three months to find out whether she had cancer.

"I know how fast cancer grows," she says. "I've seen it."

She phoned another gynecological surgeon for a second opinion, begging for an immediate appointment. By the time she reached a nurse at his office, Gilbert was so hysterical she could barely speak.

The doctor made room for her that day, sending her for another scan. Gilbert ended up being fine, but she was done living in fear.

"There was a cloud that was constantly over my head," she says. "It was never if I would get cancer, it was always when. And that is a terrible way to live."

Was Gilbert being too drastic? She initially thought so. After all, these procedures were voluntary: She wasn't even sick.

Yet, if she chose to keep her uterus, Gilbert would have to take hormones to shed the organ's lining, mimicking a natural menstrual cycle.

With some medical studies linking hormones to breast cancer — and with Gilbert already considered high risk — she didn't want to take a chance. Since she wasn't having any more children, she felt she'd be supporting an organ that she didn't need anymore.

So she decided to have a hysterectomy. Then the question of her cervix came up.

Removal had nothing to do with lowering Gilbert's odds of getting cervical cancer. Cervical cancer isn't passed through a gene like BRCA1; the major cause is a virus.



Stephen Schmitt/The Journal News
Allison Gilbert plays with her son, Jake, 8, on the living-room floor of their Irvington home.

ing," he says. "She's somewhat impatient, and this is major surgery she underwent. It's not like removing your gallbladder. This has ramifications for the rest of your life."

By then, Gilbert was 37. She argued that 40 was just around the corner, when she'd planned to have the surgery anyway. Why wait, she asked her husband.

Mark eventually agreed. After further consultation with her doctors, Gilbert scheduled a surgery date: Nov. 29.

The decision to take out her ovaries was easy, she says. Their removal would reduce her risk of ovarian cancer by at least 90 percent, and slash her risk of breast cancer.

Other decisions were more complicated. Gilbert also had to choose whether to remove her uterus, fallopian tubes and cervix.

She was told that most women opt only to take out their ovaries. Gilbert, however, was different.

"I felt that while they were already in there, get rid of anything that's going to cause cancer," she says.

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However, if she wanted to keep her cervix, her surgeon said he wouldn't be able to perform the operation laparoscopically. Instead, it would be done through traditional abdominal surgery, which is more invasive and has a longer recovery period.

For weeks, she panicked after hearing that the cervix was connected to sexual satisfaction. Then her doctor assured her and Mark that removal would not impact their sex life.

"That would have been the only reason to keep it," says Gilbert.

So two weeks before the operation, she finally decided that her cervix would come out, too.

Waking up after surgery on Nov. 29, Gilbert felt tired, sore — and liberated.

As she describes it in her blog on the Huffington Post, where she wrote about the experience, the "cancer cloud" that had been following her since her mother died was gone.

"I felt like I was reclaiming my life," she says.

The kids were calm, too, simply having been told that Mommy was going to the hospital to have something done to keep her from getting sick.

Gilbert was in and out of the hospital in two days, leaving with just three tiny incisions in her belly, hip and pelvis. There were no complications. For awhile, she had no menopausal side effects, either.

"I thought I would be the only woman on the planet not to have symptoms. I was delusional," she laughs.

Three months later, hot flashes and night sweats hit her hard.

Since she was worried about the effect of estrogen on her breast cancer risk, she tried natural remedies first. Eating flaxseed and drinking less coffee didn't help much.

"I could pour an entire bottle of flaxseed on my oatmeal or whatever,

and it would not make a difference," she chuckles.

Then her doctor explained that she only needed to take small doses of estrogen, less than her body would produce naturally.

And the effect? "Life changing."

But Gilbert's journey isn't over. Even after the surgery, she's still considered at high risk for breast cancer. Now, she has up to a 40 percent chance of developing the disease.

An operation to remove her breasts is a future possibility.

But at the moment, Gilbert is enjoying the freedom that this surgery has given her. She has no regrets, saying the operation gave her a feeling of control.

"It's so empowering to be able to make a decision that could possibly save my life, [to] keep my children from knowing the same pain that I've known," she says.

Her relationship with Jake and Lexi have improved as well, though in ways that only Gilbert might notice.

She was always an engaged, hands-on mother, but before the operation, she was distracted by the possibility of dying young.

"The consistent worry and fear, it takes an emotional toll. You feel depleted," she says. "And I so don't have that anymore."

She thinks about other things these days, like when to tell her children that she had her surgery for them.

Because she's sure that she would have made different decisions, if not for Jake and Lexi.

So one day — maybe when they're in college, maybe on their wedding days, maybe when they're parents themselves — Gilbert will tell them the whole story.

It's a love story. "I did it," she says, "because I love them."

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Dylan's past recounted by an ex

ROTOLO, from 1E

time for her to leave and become her own person. But not before an abortion and emotional breakdown shattered her.

"We loved each other very much and when it ended it was mutual heartbreak," she writes in her memoir. "He avoided responsibility. I didn't make it easy for him, either. ... I knew I was not suited for his life."

"What I really like is that she doesn't go off on an ego trip or point fingers," said Izzy Young, a paterfamilias of the early Greenwich Village folk scene. "Most of the accounts of this time are by guys talking about their career. Suze's book talks about feelings and emotions."

Among the hundreds of books about Dylan and his career, Rotolo's memoir ranks as big news.

"A Freewheelin' Time" is one of the first histories of the folk music years written from a woman's perspective, and it goes beyond gossip to ask a pointed question: How did it feel? Rotolo writes that the era mattered because "we all had something to say, not something to sell."

On any given night in the Village back then, tiny basement clubs were packed with talent including Dylan, Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs, Peter, Paul & Mary, Eric Andersen, Ian & Sylvia, Dave Van Ronk and Judy Collins, plus such rising young comedians as Woody Allen and Bill Cosby.

Rotolo recalls this era with dazzling anecdotes. But unlike most of the artists who traipse through her pages, she hasn't abandoned the neighborhood. The author, now a 64-year-old artist, still lives there with her husband, a film editor, only a few blocks from the grungy walk-up she once shared with Dylan and the street where the "Freewheelin'" cover was shot.

"He was funny, engaging, intense, and he was persistent," she writes, describing her initial impressions of Dylan, whom she ran into at a folk festival in 1961. "These words completely describe who he was throughout the time we were together; only the order of the words would shift depending on the mood or circumstance."

The Dylan she knew could with-



An early, undated publicity photo of Bob Dylan in New York City.

File photo
The Journal News

draw emotionally on a moment's notice or crack up friends with outrageous humor. He'd scribble lyrics to new songs on napkins in cheery diners. Like a sponge, he absorbed new influences, sometimes not sure if he'd written a song or borrowed it from someone else. Without warning he could be cruel, affectionate or enigmatic.

He also became a hugely influential figure in the Village, and Rotolo was along for the ride.

Dylan's celebrity "made it harder for her to walk around for a few years because of that album cover," said John Sebastian, an acquaintance who went on to form the Lovin' Spoonful. "He looked like the ramblin' guy, and she was the perfect girl. Suddenly you were looking for a rumpled leather jacket just like his, and girls were wearing those high boots."

Dylan had blown into town from the Midwest, telling tall tales of how he'd run away from home to join a carnival. But Rotolo's past didn't need embellishment. She was a red diaper baby whose parents were communists. Steeped in left-wing politics, she got involved with the civil rights movement.

When they became a couple, Rotolo introduced Dylan to these worlds. Close friends noticed the change: "You could see the influence she had on him," said Sylvia Tyson of Ian & Sylvia. "This is a girl who was marching to integrate local schools when she was 15."

She was unwilling, however, to be the seventh string on Dylan's guitar. Although some have idealized the folk era, Rotolo was rebelling against pervasive male

chauvinism in the Village before she had the words to describe it.

"I am private by nature, and my instinct was to protect my privacy, and consequently his," she writes. Yet this proved impossible, as Dylan's star soared. "We got on really well, though neither one of us had any skin growing over our nerve endings. We were both over-sensitive and needed shelter from the storm."

Her reference to one of Dylan's most famous songs is no accident. She recalls "roosters crowing at the break of dawn" in the South Village, when the big breakup finally came, "he saw right from his side, and I saw right from mine."

Some rock historians believe Rotolo inspired a flock of Dylan tunes, including "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" and "Tomorrow Is a Long Time."

"I can only imagine what it must have been like to stand in her shoes," said blues singer Maria Muldaur, who lived in the Village in this period. "Suze was her own person, who loved this guy very much. Suddenly people were stepping over her, pushing her aside to talk to him. It must have been an overwhelming experience."

Although aging baby boomers who read the book may be sorely tempted to pull out their old Phil Ochs recordings, others may simply scratch their heads.

"As I read the book, I wondered, 'Gee, if my granddaughter picked it up, would it speak to her?' " asked John Cohen, a friend of Rotolo's who formed the New Lost City Ramblers. "I think it would, because she'd ask herself: Is there a Greenwich Village somewhere for me?"