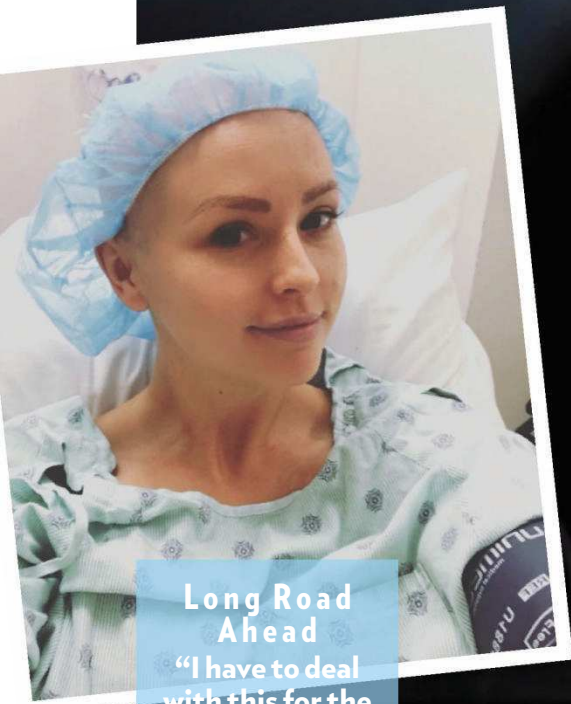


A MISSED DIAGNOSIS

‘ I WAS TOLD I WAS
TOO YOUNG TO HAVE
BREAST CANCER ’



Long Road Ahead

“I have to deal with this for the rest of my life,” says La'Bounty (at home in Huntington Beach, Calif.). Inset: Before surgery for egg retrieval in 2018.

COURTESY BRENT MAGGARD; INSET: COURTESY PHILECIA LA'BOUNTY

AT 30, PHILECIA LA'BOUNTY FOUND A LUMP IN HER BREAST—BUT WAS DENIED A MAMMOGRAM BECAUSE OF HER AGE AND FAMILY HISTORY. JUST MONTHS LATER SHE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH STAGE 4 BREAST CANCER

By **STEPHANIE EMMA PFEFFER**

It was a night in early 2018 that Philecia La'Bounty will never forget. After working a long week as an administrative assistant at a family medical practice near her home in Huntington Beach, Calif., the part-time model was heading out to the movies with her boyfriend, Brent Maggard. They'd just settled into their seats when La'Bounty adjusted her sports bra and felt a "marble-size" lump at the bottom of her left breast. "It was not normal for me," she says.

The next day she checked in with physicians at work, who referred her to a free program to have it examined—since, as a per diem employee, she wasn't covered by the practice's health insurance.

The results from a subsequent ultrasound indicated it was likely a benign cyst. But when La'Bounty asked for a mammogram just to be sure, the program denied her request. Twice. "I was told, 'You're 30, you're healthy. You have no other symptoms, no family history of breast cancer. Just come back if it bothers you.'"

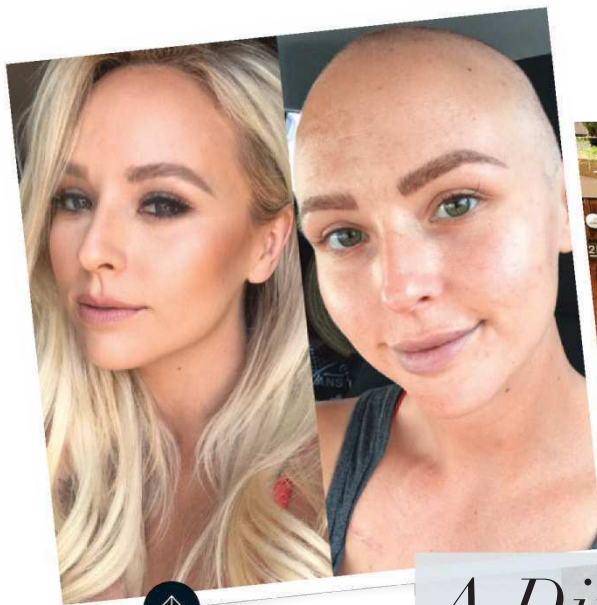
For the next several months La'Bounty, who was born in Sandy, Utah, tried to convince herself that the lump wasn't anything serious. But it continued to grow dramatically and began showing through her clothes. "So I went back in and said, 'Hey, it's bothering me. I don't really want my boyfriend to touch me, and I don't want to touch it,'" she says. "It's freaking me out." Another ultrasound, a mammogram, an MRI, a CT scan, a PT scan and eight biopsies revealed that La'Bounty had stage 4 breast cancer that had metastasized to her lungs, one of her lymph nodes and sternum.

"I was being poked and prodded and touched and scanned and seeing 10 doctors in a week," she says. "I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to tell my family and is my modeling career over? I haven't even done big things yet. What was I going to look like? It was one of the most traumatic weeks of my life."

La'Bounty was also angry. "I did what you're supposed to

'FOR RIGHT NOW, I'M ON CHEMO FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE'

—PHILECIA LA'BOUNTY



Before & After
Within two weeks of starting her chemo, La'Bounty says, "I was bald from head to toe. Below my chin, it was awesome. The rest sucked."

A Difficult Journey



Painful Reality

In January 2019, La'Bounty had to have her ovaries and fallopian tubes removed: "I'll never be able to carry my own children. Cancer took that from me."

Staying Positive

Shortly before she started chemo, La'Bounty took a brief "chemo moon" vacation in Palm Springs, Calif., with Maggard.



A Long Haul

"It's just been an endless cycle of not feeling well," says La'Bounty (at Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian in Newport Beach, Calif., after a 2019 surgery). "I'm stage 4, which is classified as terminal."

do—and I was failed by the system," she says. Determined to help other young women avoid a similar ordeal, she started sharing her story on TikTok (@philecialabounty) in September 2020 and now has more than 40,000 followers. "Had I seen someone my age going through anything remotely close to what I was dealing with, I would have fought harder," she says. "If you feel something's not right, don't settle until you find out what it is."

According to the CDC, about 9 percent of all new cases of breast cancer in the U.S. are found



Chemo Prep

La'Bounty had a chemo port put in not long after her diagnosis. "I didn't want to tell anybody until I absolutely had to," she says.



How to Be Your Own Advocate

“It’s still fairly uncommon to have breast cancer if you’re under 40,” says Dr. Marleen Meyers, a clinical professor of medicine at NYU Langone. While the American Cancer Society strongly recommends that women ages 45 to 54 have annual mammograms, Meyers says, “If something feels wrong, be doggedly persistent.” She suggests:

- Ask your doctor questions such as “When should I come back?” “Are you going to check this again?” “How do you know for sure this isn’t breast cancer?”
- If your concerns aren’t addressed, ask for a referral to a breast surgeon who can perform a biopsy.
- If you don’t have insurance, says Meyers, “a city hospital will give you what you need.”

in women under the age of 45. “Rates have gone up somewhat because obesity rates have been increasing [and] women are having children later,” says Dr. Marleen Meyers, a clinical professor of medicine at NYU Langone’s Perlmutter Cancer Center. “But hearing ‘You’re too young for breast cancer’ is something that women should never accept. And if you have a lump anywhere, not just your breast, you can’t ever give up on that.”

Within a few weeks of her diagnosis, La’Bounty started a grueling regimen of chemotherapy—including an infusion of a powerful drug called doxorubicin, known as the Red Devil. “It’s the strongest one you can have,” she recalls. “I couldn’t even swallow my own spit without vomiting.” Over the next few months she endured six rounds of chemo, then, as a preventative measure, underwent surgery to remove her fallopian tubes and ovaries, which threw her body into menopause. “It all happens so fast that you don’t really have time to process it,” she says. Now 35, she must undergo intensive treatment for the rest of her life, though fortunately her latest scans show no signs of active cancer. She is currently on a regimen of oral chemo, which involves taking one pill nightly for three weeks, with two weeks off. “By the end of each round, I’m depleted,” says La’Bounty, whose ordeal at one point left her \$80,000 in debt; a friend started a GoFundMe account that raised more than \$39,000. “I have chemo brain, depression, anxiety, hot flashes, fatigue, muscle pain, joint pain. I feel like I got hit by a bus. That lasts about two weeks,



Love & Support

“He keeps our life active and happy,” says La’Bounty (with boyfriend Brent Maggard, top, in Trabuco Canyon, Calif., in 2018 and, inset, in August 2022).

‘I WANT TO GIVE HOPE TO OTHERS THAT YOU CAN STILL LIVE YOUR LIFE’

—PHILECIA LA’BOUNTY

but then I get two weeks of feeling okay.”

She works out every day that she’s up to it and is determined to make the most of every minute. “I never say no to anything, because I need to do everything,” she says. “And if I do something big, like take a vacation, I just know the days after are going to be rough.”

Through it all, she says, Maggard, 38, who works in the off-road industry, has been her champion. “Our life has been put on hold, from buying a house to having a family. But he’s stood by my side and gone to every appointment,” she says. And, since La’Bounty was able to freeze some of her eggs, the couple, who have been together nine years, hope to find a surrogate. “When I do pass away, I want my kids to be like, ‘Wow, my mom did that—she took her situation and made something of it,’” she says. “I won’t lay down and die. I have to fight every day to stay healthy. I just keep pushing, trying to keep living the best I can.” ●