



# Lake Elsinore sister survivors share breast cancer story

By *Ashley Ludwig* on April 13, 2016



Lake Elsinore residents, Sonia Briseno, with sister Angella Nunez, both breast cancer survivors, pose for photos to credit the Susan G. Komen Foundation for their survival. (Courtesy photo)

The day that Lake Elsinore resident Sonia Briseno learned that she had breast cancer and no insurance, her greatest fear was realized.

"I was with my mom, and she was trying to reassure me," Briseno said. "She said that whatever the doctors said, it would be something good, or something I had to work on."

With the Stage 2 invasive ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) diagnosis, and no health insurance, Sonia allowed herself to cry that day.

"We cried together, but I refused to believe I was going to die," she said.

Briseno grew up in Tijuana, Mexico, lived in Orange County, and moved with her husband to Lake Elsinore. She was living and working there, part time as a restaurant server, when she received her diagnosis of breast cancer at a Mexican clinic in 2008. She needed retesting in the state of California and family directed her to the Altamed Clinic in Huntington Beach, who then referred her to the Susan G. Komen Orange County branch. There, she received state-sponsored treatment, including a complete mastectomy.

"I went regularly to follow up, annual mammograms and ultrasounds," she said. "I never missed a self-check or screening."

In 2013, Briseno noticed pain in her right breast and had her sister go with her for breast cancer screening and biopsy. During that appointment, she learned that she tested positive for the BRCA gene mutation—meaning she had a greater risk for reoccurrence of breast and ovarian cancer. The doctor recommended that her sister, Angelica, be screened and tested for the gene, as well.

Not knowing the results of the test, Briseno went on to New Orleans to join the National Council of La Raza – America's largest Latino advocacy organization, to share her breast cancer survival story. When she returned, she learned not only that she had a reoccurrence of her cancer, but that her sister received a breast cancer diagnosis, as well.

"Angie was diagnosed both with the BRCA gene and with Stage 1 DCIS," Briseno said. "The doctor couldn't believe it was happening to us both at the same time."

The words of her mother returned to her.

"I kept thinking about what my mother said. It can be something good or something I have to work on," she said. "I learned I had breast cancer again, so I said, 'Okay, fine. What are we going to do?' and my sister and I scheduled our respective surgeries on the same day."

On Sept. 18, 2013, Briseno had her right breast and her left implant removed, and Angelica received a bilateral mastectomy.

"The great news was the doctor was certain she wouldn't need chemotherapy or radiation," Briseno said.

In her mother's words, Briseno knew the recovery for both of them would not be easy, but it wasn't impossible. They would survive. The two sisters lived together during their post-surgery and recovery time, drawing strength from one another.

"I'm not just the older sibling, but I had been through surgery before, and eight rounds of chemotherapy," Briseno said.

When asked how their joint-recovery was going, Briseno stated that she would put a smile on her face before answering.

"I would say we were feeling great," she said. "I found my strength, and wanted to be there for my sister."

Now, three years later, Briseno still struggles with the side effects of chemotherapy.

"I'm grateful for every day that I am on this earth," she said. "I thank God for keeping me here, because I have a purpose to be here for other breast cancer survivors, so that they will know they are not alone. There are people waiting to guide you through the treatment and recovery journey."

The news of the two sister's journey touched the Susan G. Komen Orange County and was celebrated at the third annual Komen Orange County and Knott's Berry Farm partnership campaign, raising awareness and funds for breast cancer, focused on a sister's love. Briseno and her sister Angelica were one of several sets of sisters who were the faces of the campaign, and continue to share their story with pride.

When asked what she would share with other women, Briseno discussed the importance of receiving annual mammograms and ultrasounds.

"Self-checks are the most important thing a woman can do every month," she said. "I found the cancer both times."

Briseno doesn't take anything for granted anymore.

"I enjoy life day to day, taking it one step at a time," she said. "I also live my life with more passion. I owe everything to the Susan G. Komen foundation, and give them my heart and gratitude for being here today."

For more information, visit [www.Komenoc.org](http://www.Komenoc.org).