Men don't get breast cancer—do they?

When Harvey Singer's chest first felt irritated, he brushed it off. Guys don't get breast cancer, he thought. But he was wrong. And after a frustrating and difficult battle, he found a brand-new way to reach out and give other men facing this rare disease the support they need.

Getting a mammogram was the last place Harvey expected to find himself. Sure, he'd worried when his aunt, then his mother and sister, Vicki, were diagnosed with breast cancer. His heart ached most for Vicki, whose cancer returned three times. So Vicki got tested for the BRCA2 genetic mutation, which increases the odds of developing breast cancer.

It was positive.

"And it's genetic," Vicki cautioned Harvey. "You have to be careful too."

"But I'm a guy," Harvey reassured Vicki and his wife, Donna. "Guys don't get breast cancer."

Then, one day, Harvey felt an irritation around his left nipple.

At first, he reacted like many men do: He ignored it. The following month, though, a friend hugged Harvey—and suddenly, an electrifying pain shot through his chest.

"You're going to the doctor," Donna said.

Now, as the nurse called his name, Harvey sheepishly followed—and found himself trying to fit his chest onto the tray meant for a woman's breast. When it showed a lump, Harvey had an ultrasound, then a biopsy. And soon after..."Sit," the voice on the phone said, "you have breast cancer."

Stunned, Harvey tried not to ask "Why me?" Instead, he turned to research—but found almost nothing. Because male breast cancer is so rare—accounting for just 1% of breast cancers—doctors aren't sure why it happens, or if traditional treatments will be successful for men.

Even Harvey's longtime doctor blurted, "How is that possible?" But he quickly caught himself, then arranged an appointment with a top breast cancer surgeon.

There, it was determined that Harvey didn't have enough breast tissue for a lumpectomy. So surgeons had to perform a mastectomy, removing tissue from the whole left side of his chest.

Later tests showed that Harvey, like Vicki, also carried the risk-increasing BRCA2 gene. And because his malignancy was an aggressive cell type, he'd also need chemotherapy.

In that moment, Harvey suddenly understood everything his mother and Vicki had endured. The uncertainty. The terror.

But, being a man, there was even more to it than that: "You have what?" Harvey's golf buddies said, cracking uneasy jokes.

That's how guys deal with uncomfortable things, Harvey knew. But it wasn't easy—just as it wasn't easy getting all the stares and whispers in waiting rooms.

"Oh, Donna, not you, too?" someone they knew rushed over to say one day.

"No," Donna replied. "We're here for Harvey.

And as the woman fumbled for words, it struck Harvey. When I get better, I need to create a place so that guys with breast cancer know they aren't alone.

Harvey's new mission

After Harvey was pronounced cancer-free, he and his sister Vicki realized—especially with five grown sons between them—that they needed to make more people aware of male breast cancer.

So together they launched the nonprofit website HIS Breast Cancer Awareness (HISBreastCancer.org).

Longing to make it the place he wished he could've found when he was diagnosed, Harvey included information on risk factors. Self-exams. Even holistic diet and exercise plans. And soon, men from as far away as Australia were sending words of gratitude.

"It's so awesome that you've done this," one man wrote.

"Finally, a place where I don't feel weird," another penned. Thank you!

Today, Vicki—who also remains cancer-free—says it's no accident HISBreastCancer.org bears Harvey Irving Singer's initials.

"Everything happens for a reason," she says. And Harvey, she believes, was diagnosed to help spread the word that if a man suspects breast cancer, he should get to the doctor, his head held high. Because breast cancer does happen to men. And early detection makes all the difference.

"Some guys think that they're less of a man because they have a 'woman's disease,'" Harvey adds. "What a good feeling to know we're helping to change that perception! If we can save even one life this way, it will all be worth it."

—Naomi Kenan

Harvey's best stay-positive tips!

✓ Learn from others!

"Because my sister had already been through breast cancer, I could talk to her about everything." Harvey says. Find a support group where others can keep you upbeat!

✓ Meditate!

Eliminate all distractions for 15 to 30 minutes a day. "I listen to my breathing and focus on the present—not worry about the future," Harvey says. "It teaches you to live in the moment!"

✓ Keep busy!

"Even when I was at my worst, I never lay in bed and felt sorry for myself," Harvey says. "I forced myself to get out of the house. It kept my spirits high!"