



# AMY

BY ALEXIS BLUE

# BLACKBURN

It was a seemingly normal day in 2005 when a 5 p.m. phone call changed Cynthia Ogden's life forever — a phone call to inform her that she had breast cancer. That evening, Cynthia went to the home of her best friend, Amy Blackburn — a registered nurse and professional photographer — to tell her about her diagnosis. As Cynthia shared her heartbreaking news, she asked her friend to photograph her the way she looked that night. It was the beginning of a project neither woman could have anticipated.

Amy, who usually specializes in photographing pregnant women and mothers with new babies, soon found herself aiming her lens in hospital rooms instead. As she followed Cynthia through breast cancer treatment, she photographically documented each painful step, including a double mas-

tectomy, the loss of her friend's hair and long hours of chemotherapy and recovery.

The striking, dramatic images now appear in the book "Caring for Cynthia: A Caregiver's Journey Through Breast Cancer," in which Amy shares her emotional experience as a caregiver during her best friend's battle with the disease.

Although the two women met while working as medical professionals on Arizona's San Carlos Apache reservation, Amy says their medical backgrounds couldn't have prepared them for the difficult journey following a cancer diagnosis. She hopes her book will open people's eyes to the emotional reality of cancer.

Cynthia, who will turn 45 this month, is now cancer-free.

## “It takes a community to help people who are diagnosed [with cancer] get through it.”



**OVM:** How did the idea for “Caring for Cynthia” develop?

**AB:** We were about a month into taking these pictures and I didn’t even know why I was taking them. It was something, but I didn’t know what it was. About six months into it, I started to get that it could be my story, because the caregiver’s story has never quite been told before. There’s a book that a husband of a breast cancer patient wrote, but it’s not a pictorial. I’m such a visual person I don’t really get it until I see it. The intention was that we’d show it in a book. Cynthia’s exceptionally amazing and courageous throughout the book, and it will be great if those diagnosed with cancer can see that and get that they can be just as strong and steadfast. There’s really no other way to go through cancer. You can’t be a victim; there’s no time for that with cancer.

**OVM:** What was your involvement in Cynthia’s treatment?

**AB:** All these people pulled together to be this caring community for Cynthia, and I was just one of the people on the care team. What was so glorious for me was Cynthia elected to be helped. A lot of people don’t tell others they have cancer, they keep it sort of secret because they’re embarrassed, they’re afraid. Then people aren’t able to step forward to help them because they don’t know they need help. The undertone of the book is that it really takes a community to help people who are diagnosed to get through it.

**OVM:** What was the biggest challenge in watching your best friend battle cancer?

**AB:** It was emotional and often scary because of the unknown. As a nurse, I knew some things, but despite our medical backgrounds, we really didn’t know what to expect. Probably the most painful part was: For a good part of the year, I lost my best friend. All the stuff we used to do, we weren’t able to do it. We used to walk sometimes six miles a day. She’s a healthy, vibrant young woman who’s now been diminished to someone who can’t get out of her bed.

**OVM:** Did taking photographs help you emotionally?

**AB:** Absolutely. We actually used photography to help us deal with what was happening because by being photographed and by being the photographer we got to escape our reality.

**OVM:** How is the photography you did for this book different from the work you typically do?

**AB:** I do a lot of my work with studio lights, and in Cynthia’s case I was working with whatever ambient light was coming from the fluorescent lights in the hospital, handholding the camera in bizarre waiting room situations, teeny little exam rooms. But I still photographed her and anyone we encountered on the journey in the same way — just them being themselves.

**OVM:** Was Cynthia comfortable being photographed in this way?

**AB:** She was extremely comfortable. We talked often about the level of friendship that allowed us to create the imagery. Who would let you take pictures of their naked chest or being fitted for a breast prosthesis? [Other] photographers would have to go through weeks or months of establishing a relationship with a subject before they could get images like this.

**OVM:** Is it difficult to share such a personal story with the public?

**AB:** The text is all me sharing myself, and the images are all Cynthia sharing herself. We are ready to experience a high level of vulnerability in that which we are about to share with the nation or the world.

**OVM:** Had your life ever been affected by cancer before this?

**AB:** No, this was the first time. I’ve never had a family member or loved one sick. I indicate in the book that I was really scared, and I think it’s important for other people to read that it’s ok to be scared.

**OVM:** When you sat down to write the text for the book, what was that process like?

**AB:** It was virtually impossible for me to develop the text from the fear of not wanting to re-experience it. I really had to take myself back to that day and really dig into my emotions so I could share them with everyone. The text was painful, very painful. I cried a lot and very often I just thought I couldn’t do it.

**OVM:** Who should read this book?

**AB:** Anybody who’s been initially diagnosed with cancer. It should be given to them the day they’re told. I’m looking for the book to be an educational tool that physicians hand out to patients that day. Physicians only have 15 minute, maybe half-hour timeslots with patients, and they can’t go over all the information in that time. And patients need time to digest information, and then questions come up. The book can be a way for them to ease into it and develop their set of questions for the physician.

The secondary audience is the people that surround that patient. The American Cancer Society estimates that 180,000 people will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year, but nobody’s keeping track of the percentage of co-survivors. Even though I wasn’t diagnosed, it’s like I was diagnosed — not physically diagnosed, but emotionally tied into the disease process.

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FOR A SIGNED COPY OF “CARING FOR CYNTHIA: A CAREGIVER’S JOURNEY THROUGH BREAST CANCER,” (CHANNEL PHOTOGRAPHICS IN CONJUNCTION WITH VERVE EDITIONS, \$24.95) CONTACT THE AUTHOR, AMY BLACKBURN, AT 991.5736 OR AMY@CARINGFORCYNTHIA.COM. UNSIGNED EDITIONS ARE AVAILABLE AT CARINGFORCYNTHIA.COM, MAJOR BOOKSTORES AND ONLINE RETAILERS.

## Sense of Community

Dr. Deb Oro



Last week was the date of my annual mammography. The nurse started the exam with a series of standard questions.

To one of her inquiries—after a smile and a slight giggle—I said, “No, but thanks for being brave enough to ask.” Kathy replied, “You’d be astounded how many ‘yes’ answers I get.” She stopped me in my tracks with that comment since her question had been, “Are you being abused?”

Over the years I have fielded that question from physicians, police, social workers, and mentally on my own in restrooms where flyers are posted. It takes both courage and compassion to be open to both asking the difficult question and hearing the answer. For the health of our society, our community and our families, we must all be aware and able to do this. Only when the conversation is begun can progress be made in the battle against abuse.

Remove a brick in the wall of silence and let the sun shine in; you can’t imagine the radiant glow that will emerge from within the person who needs to answer with a ‘yes’.

With many thanks for *your* bravery to ask the awkward question... from abuse survivors, both young and old, across all walks of life.

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**OVM:** What message do you hope to send with the book?

**AB:** There is a conversation about caring that's absent in the community. There are people that need to be cared for, but nobody's talking about the emotions and the challenges that are faced when caring for people. Everyone is either going to be cared for or is going to be a caregiver in this lifetime, period. You won't be able to escape it, and I want us to start sharing our experiences so we can learn from each other. ■



FOR INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND HER OTHER WORK, VISIT AMY BLACKBURN PHOTOGRAPHY AT [AMYBLACKBURNPHOTOGRAPHY.COM](http://AMYBLACKBURNPHOTOGRAPHY.COM)



CYNTHIA OGDEN IS NOW CANCER-FREE