



TWO

OF US

STORY BY Rosamund Burton PHOTOGRAPH BY James Brickwood

Rhonda Farrell (left), 53, and Megan Moran, 53, were childhood friends in Sydney's Sutherland. When Megan was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, Rhonda, a gynaecological oncologist and surgeon, stepped up to operate.

MEGAN: My first memory of Rhonda is in the playground of Sutherland Infants School. She was surrounded by kids and telling them that her birthday was in four days' time. I was really envious as my birthday was still eight days away. We became friends.

At Sutherland Primary, Rhonda lived with my family for a month when her mother was sick. Weekends were lost to Monopoly marathons and playing jacks. We'd go down the hill behind her house on her billy cart with me holding onto her for dear life. She was fearless and tough.

Rhonda was artistic, athletic and really smart. She could make me laugh till I was about to burst. She was a larrikin. I can still hear one teacher at Jannali Girls High, yelling her name in complete exasperation.

After leaving school we didn't see each other much. I did accounting at the University of Technology, and Rhonda did physiotherapy, then a medical degree. I went to London and met my husband, John, an antique dealer from Ireland's County Mayo, and we lived in Ireland when our three girls were young.

Rhonda and I connected occasionally through

Facebook. We caught up at our 30-year high school reunion. Rhonda said she was now a gynaecological oncologist and surgeon.

In December 2015, I went to my GP for persistent bloating and exhaustion. She sent me for a scan, then called me back and said I had an 18-centimetre tumour on my ovary. Being close to Christmas, she was having trouble getting an appointment with a gynaecological oncologist. I said, "If I need that type of doctor, I want to see my friend." She tried ringing Rhonda, but was unable to get through, so I rang her on her mobile. She was in her scrubs between operations. I asked if I could I put her on to my GP for a minute. When the doctor explained my symptoms, Rhonda asked for extra blood tests to be run, then said she'd call me that evening.

She asked me lots of questions, then told me to come to her rooms the following Tuesday. Our relationship changed from two friends who rarely saw one another to surgeon and patient. When she examined my uterus and checked my back passage and breasts, I tried not to think of her as my childhood friend. But she was very at ease and the absolute professional.

It was a complex, eight-hour surgery, but I felt completely safe in her hands. She is so accomplished and held in such high regard. Everyone I met, from the nurses to other specialists, all had deep respect, admiration and warmth for her. Yet I can still see the Sutherland girl who can talk to anybody.

On my auntie's biscuit tin was the saying, "New friends are like silver, but old friends are like gold." Rhonda was a huge part of my childhood, and despite not spending much time with her since, I still feel I know, understand and trust her. She has laid footprints on my life.

RHONDA: Megan and I met in kindergarten and became best friends throughout our primary school years. Because our birthdays were four days apart, we often shared parties. We bonded because we were tomboys and also thinkers. Megan was shy and gentle, yet strong.

When my mother was admitted to hospital with severe depression, I stayed with Megan and her family. They had a flower farm surrounded by bushland, so we climbed trees and played in the caves. I grew up in a council house opposite the local swimming pool. My father was a grader driver and the pool caretaker.

We remained good friends throughout high school but also had our own separate groups of friends. As we were in the top classes for most subjects, we usually sat next to each other. Megan came to my 21st, but I didn't go to hers, which I regret. I was working in a bar to support myself through uni; I trained for six years in obstetrics and gynaecology before specialising in gynaecological oncology.

We had a 30-year school reunion in 2013. Megan had moved back from Ireland with her family, and was living near her parents and really happy. Then in December 2015, she rang me. She had a large pelvic mass and her GP was concerned. It was fairly clear to me that she had ovarian cancer, but I wouldn't know until the surgery. I discussed my plan to take out her ovaries, tubes and uterus, and possibly part of her lower bowel, and bladder.

Megan's operation was the week before Christmas, and she did need all of the planned surgeries, plus removing part of her ureter [urine tube] and a stoma [bowel bag]. It was hard explaining that her beautiful hair would fall out with the chemotherapy.

She was very resilient and never complained, but I'm sure she was scared. I know she found it hard living with that stoma for seven months, but it was able to be reversed. Because she had stage-two ovarian cancer, and it hadn't spread, her prognosis is good. As it has now been more than three years since Megan's diagnosis, I am very hopeful for her.

Since 2017, John and Megan have organised annual charity auctions for ovarian cancer research, raising more than \$35,000. I arranged for them to visit the research lab at the University of NSW, so they could see where the money went, which they appreciated.

It's like we've gone full circle. Megan and her mother looked after me when my mum was sick, and now I'm helping her stay healthy. And she's stuck with me as, having had ovarian cancer, she has to see me at least once a year forever. She is a good friend to have. I'm very lucky. ■

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