

CALIFORNIA



When Cancer Strikes Twice: “Being a Dancer Has Saved My Life in So Many Ways”

By Stacy Finz

Brianna Mercado is tired of telling the same old story.

“It’s a cookie-cutter cancer story and I’m so much more than that,” she told a crowd last year at a [TEDx talk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6T8sBxB6Rlk) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6T8sBxB6Rlk>).

Today, the 24-year-old UC Berkeley graduate and inspirational speaker has been asked to tell the story so many times that it’s become rote. But how can you truly express the fears and pain of knocking on death’s door not once, but twice? How do you verbalize it in a way that can make people understand the trauma and the terror?

“Hello, my name is Brianna Mercado, blah, blah blah. I had cancer, la-di-da-di-da. And if it weren’t for my loving doctors and my caring nurses and the latest advancements in modern medicine, I would not be standing here today. Thank you,” she sarcastically told the room full of spectators to demonstrate how trite the story had become.

And then the professional dancer took off her jewelry and shoes and proceeded to dance.

SELF PORTRAIT | Brianna Mercado



“Being a dancer has saved my life in so many ways,” she says now from North Carolina, where she’s attending a wilderness camp for young adult cancer survivors. “I know I wouldn’t be here had it not been for dancing.”

Even before her TEDx talk, word had gotten back to the relatively small dance community at Cal that Mercado’s cancer was back. Crazy as the odds were, this time it was a different cancer than the one she’d battled and survived as a high school student. But the treatment would leave permanent scars, like the other one did.

Stephanie Sherman, a choreographer at UC Berkeley, thought she might be able to help with Mercado’s healing, and at the same time give her a better vehicle to tell her story by cutting out the words altogether. In the end, Mercado says they created a piece of performance art that told an entirely different story—perhaps her proudest story yet. And soon they plan to show it to the world.

But the story starts long before Mercado got sick. She was just 5 years old, growing up in San Jose, when her mother signed her and her sister up for dance classes. Ballet, jazz, tap and contemporary—Mercado did it all. By elementary school, while most kids were discovering the monkey bars, she’d found her passion. All she wanted to do was dance.

At 15 she was performing regularly as a member of a San Jose dance company. That was also the year she discovered a lump between her breast and armpit.

“The doctors initially thought it was nothing: calcium deposits,” she says, adding that they estimated the lump wouldn’t be big enough to remove until she was 40. But it was not nothing; it was Ewing’s sarcoma, a rare bone or soft-tissue cancer that primarily affects children.

For the next year she underwent treatment, including surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation. "After my first round of chemo, I'd lost my hair and shaved my scalp bald," Mercado says. "A few weeks later I had a dance recital, and was so nervous that my teacher would be upset that I didn't look right."

Instead, she was lauded with applause. "That," she recalls, "was a pretty good motivator."

Still, she spent her high school sophomore year either bedridden, weak or nauseated, and often all three at the same time. And then there was the specter of death—too much for a 15 year old to contemplate, although she'd seen a fair number of friends who'd had to have limbs amputated because of the deadly disease.

What if it happened to her and she could no longer dance? That was the scenario that haunted her. But five years after the treatment, her doctors deemed her cured. By this time she was attending UC Berkeley with a double major: dance and performance studies, and social welfare. For a time she thought she might like to work for a non-profit. But it was dance that consumed her.

Mercado was elected the director of the Main Stacks Dance Team, a competitive hip-hop troupe of about 35 students. Unlike the classics, Mercado says, "Urban dancing taught me to move with my heart." It was a lesson that would later help her battle the next wave of cancer and assist her in making a momentous decision.

"She was meant to be a dancer regardless of the cancer. So when she came to me, I didn't focus on the cancer, because the cancer didn't deserve my focus."

"Six months before graduation, I decided that I wasn't done dancing," Mercado said. Her Berkeley instructor, Amara Tabor-Smith, inspired her to go to New York.

"I was convinced in my gut that it was Brianna's path to be a dancer," said Tabor-Smith, who teaches contemporary dance. "It's not just that she can execute the moves, do the turns or the kicks. She has a spirit and an energy that's indescribable. Love is what I see when I watch Brianna dance."

Tabor-Smith was aware of Mercado's war with Ewing's sarcoma. But she says it wasn't as if she told Mercado, "You almost died, go to New York, be a dancer, seize the day."

"She was meant to be a dancer regardless of the cancer. So when she came to me, I didn't focus on the cancer, because the cancer didn't deserve my focus."

That summer after graduation, Mercado slept in her sister's closet at night and spent her days applying to dance programs. She babysat, waitressed and worked in a bakery. By fall and winter, she was regularly going out on auditions and spending grueling hours rehearsing.

At Christmas she came home to San Jose for a routine MRI to make sure that the Ewing's sarcoma was still gone. On Christmas Eve she got the call. Mercado had stage four thyroid cancer —the doctors found a 3 ½-centimeter tumor in her neck. Shortly after the diagnosis they removed her thyroid in two surgeries and gave her a dose of radioactive iodine pills. She still has microscopic traces of the cancer, but the doctors continue to monitor it and are hopeful.

Mercado is at a loss for words. "How did this happen again?" she wants to know.

But through it all, people in the dance community and her friends watched her persevere.

"She's so positive about everything," says Sherman, the choreographer. "She's amazing."

Sherman, though, thought Mercado could use a project—something that would take her mind off the pain of recovering. She was also itching to work with the dancer after having seen her perform during her university days. "She absolutely blew me away."

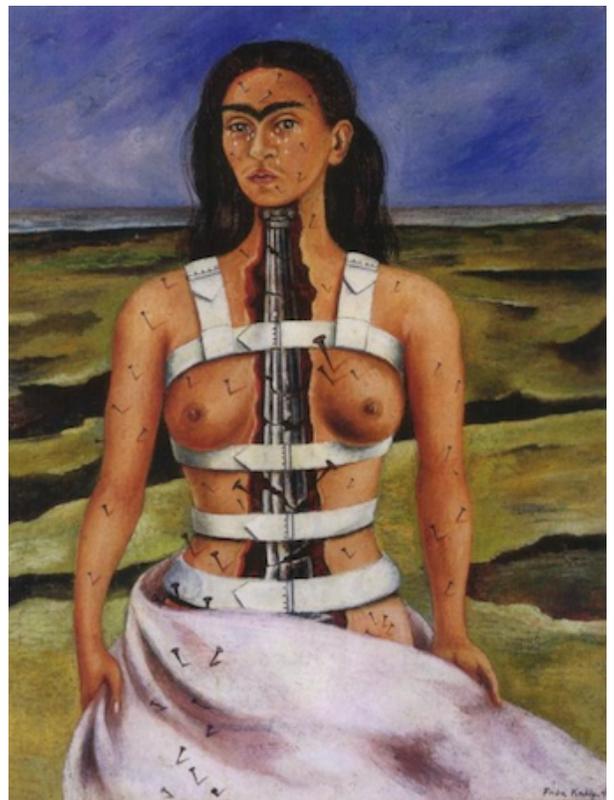
Weeks after Mercado's surgery, Sherman approached her about her idea. They started looking at Frida Kahlo's "Broken Column," a self-portrait of the artist with nails in her face, arms and torso, her chest split open and the bottom half of her wrapped in a white hospital sheet. For days they sat and talked about what they wanted to do. From those discussion was born "Self Portrait," a performance piece featuring Mercado.

"We started looking at her body as a war map," Sherman said. "We decided to create movement that went to the different places on her body where she'd been radiated, scarred or cut into during the cancer treatments."

The piece, which began merely as a personal project, soon grew. Marica Petrey, another UC Berkeley grad, was brought in to do the music but eventually became the director on the piece, recruiting Mogli Maureal to do the sound design and Mikl Barton to handle lighting and shooting.

"In the beginning we were just going to videotape it for her," Petrey said. "Then we decided to zoom in on areas of her body. Pretty soon we had six cameras involved."

Throughout the nearly 10-minute piece, Mercado only moves the upper part of her body. "Self Portrait" is scheduled to be screened June 25 at 7 p.m. at the Alchemical Theatre Laboratory in New York City.



“Every movement has a reference or a metaphor to my treatment,” she says. “I see this piece as a way to portray a little slice of how painful cancer is. It’s not a pink ribbon, it’s gruesome.”

And it’s no cookie-cutter cancer story.

SELF PORTRAIT | The Creative Process



Posted on June 10, 2015 - 3:30pm

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CYNTHIA MELLON REPLIED ON JUNE 11, 2015 - 4:36PM [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/19561#COMMENT-19561\)](#)

What, if anything, is being done to find out why so many young people in the region where Brianna grew up are getting cancer? She refers to this in this article—that other young people list limbs. Thank you.

MEGAN MAURINO REPLIED ON JUNE 16, 2015 - 3:12PM [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/19587#COMMENT-19587\)](#)

Brianna. Your story is so inspiring. I am in tears watching the video. Follow your dreams. You have inspired me to follow mine!

BETH HOLLIDAY REPLIED ON JULY 9, 2015 - 1:50PM [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/19686#COMMENT-19686\)](#)

I'm just curious as to how a 24 year old with or without distant mets who is still using RAI for treatments is deemed Stage IV?? I seriously advise you to look into how thyroid cancer is staged as I think you are mistaking a T4 tumor for a Stage IV tumor. They are NOT one and the same. A T4 tumor (which is what this appears to be) in someone under the age of 45 is still considered stage I. Only distant metastatic thyroid cancer that no longer responds to RAI (mainly in patients OVER 45) in organs outside of lymph nodes is usually considered Stage IV. I share this because it is a VERY bad mistake that patients make regarding their staging is misunderstanding T staging for overall staging. I'm a metastatic thyroid cancer patient who is considered "RAI resistant" with multiple recurrences and still not considered Stage IV because of my age. I run the group on facebook for metastatic RAI resistant thyroid cancer patients. So this is like comparing a stage I patient to an actual stage IV patient that has to be on TKIs and chemo and such. Not the same. At all. Directly from the cancer society "Younger people have a low likelihood of dying from differentiated (papillary or follicular) thyroid cancer. The TNM stage groupings for these cancers take this fact into account. So, all people younger than 45 years with these cancers are stage I if they have no distant spread and stage II if they have distant spread". The only exception to that being RAI resistant highly aggressive (usually poorly differentiated) distant mets in younger people. T4 just isn't the same thing as Stage IV. <http://www.cancer.org/cancer/thyroidcancer/detailedguide/thyroid-cancer-...>
(<http://www.cancer.org/cancer/thyroidcancer/detailedguide/thyroid-cancer-staging>)

ANTIBODY HUMANIZATION REPLIED ON AUGUST 13, 2015 - 8:36PM [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/19835#COMMENT-19835\)](#)

Brianna's TED talk is so moving while inspiring. She doesn't need any sympathy but affirmation that she can do it. That's what I see from the video. antibody humanization <http://www.creative-biolabs.com/antibody-humanization.html> (<http://www.creative-biolabs.com/antibody-humanization.html>)

DANCERHATESCANCER REPLIED ON AUGUST 15, 2015 - 1:59PM [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/19858#COMMENT-19858\)](#)

Amazing and expressive athlete worth filming better. How could the camera people do such a bad job?! I wanted to see the dancer in all of her glory, not just her fingers tapping, etc. Did they think the rest of the choreography was meaningless at that moment?! I wanted to see all of her performance. Fire all of the camera people along with the rest who blundered this otherwise magnificent piece. Honor this special lady with the great team she deserves.

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