

Nancy Goodman Brinker (1946-)

Nancy Goodman Brinker founded the largest breast cancer organization in the US, Susan G. Komen for the Cure, during the twentieth century. In 1982, Brinker created the organization, Susan G. Komen for the Cure, in memory of her sister, who had died of breast cancer two years earlier. During the early twentieth century, breast cancer was socially stigmatized, very few people discussed the disease, and there were limited treatment options available for those diagnosed with the disease. Breast cancer is one of the most prevalent forms of cancer and it affects almost 12 percent of women worldwide. In 1983, Brinker created the Susan G. Komen Race for Cure, a fundraising and awareness event for breast cancer. The organization provides funding for research, advocacy, and programs related to breast cancer. In the early 2000s, Brinker served as the US Ambassador to Hungary and, later, as the US Chief of Protocol. In 2009, US president Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. In 2017, Brinker serves as the Chair of Global Strategy at Susan G. Komen for the Cure and as the World Health Organization's Goodwill Ambassador for Cancer Control. Brinker's activism in the field of breast cancer raised awareness, public attention, funding, and support for women affected by breast cancer.

Brinker was born on 6 December 1946 in Peoria, Illinois, to Eleanor Goodman and Marvin Goodman. She had one older sister, Susan. Brinker's father was a businessman and their mother was a Girl Scout leader and a community activist. Brinker herself described her mother as a fundraising marvel, who helped in the search for a polio vaccine in the 1950s. According to Brinker, her mother's fundraising skills had a major effect on her life choices. Brinker described herself as a tomboy with dyslexia, a speech impairment, during her secondary education. During her younger years, Brinker enjoyed riding horses. After high school, Brinker enrolled at the University of Illinois in Champaign, Illinois, where she received her bachelor of arts degree in 1968.

After graduating from University of Illinois in 1968, Brinker moved to Dallas, Texas. In Dallas, Brinker started working at Neiman-Marcus, a luxury department store, as a member of the executive training program. There, she met Robert Leitstein, whom she married in the early 1970s. In 1975, Brinker had her only child, Eric Leitstein. Two years later, she took a job as the director of public relations for Hyatt Regency Hotel in Dallas, Texas. Brinker noted that throughout her many jobs in Dallas, she was constantly fundraising for different causes.

In 1977, Brinker's only sister was diagnosed with breast cancer. Brinker stayed with her sister through all treatments and, according to Brinker, promised her sister that she would help end breast cancer. At the time, breast cancer was rarely spoken about and people did not know how prevalent and dangerous breast cancer was. Because of that, very little research was conducted on breast cancer and the general public was not aware of screening, prevention, and diagnostic methods available for breast cancer. Shortly after that, in 1978, Brinker divorced Leitstein. While helping her sister through her treatment, Brinker worked at a branch of Bozell and Jacobs Public Relations headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska, as their Account Executive. In 1980, Brinker's sister died of breast cancer at the age of thirty-six and Brinker quit her job at Bozell and Jacobs. At that point, using her fundraising and leadership experience, Brinker developed an idea for a nonprofit organization that would promote awareness and fund research for breast cancer.

In 1981, Brinker married Norman Brinker, who, according to Brinker, supported her and encouraged her mission to create the organization. Brinker's husband was a restaurateur, who founded Shake and Ale and served as the national president of Jack in the Box. In 1982, Brinker only had a few hundred dollars in donations from a few friends who wanted to help her raise awareness about breast cancer. The same year Brinker founded Susan G. Komen for the Cure. Brinker named the

organization after her sister. After founding Susan G. Komen, Brinker organized a polo tournament to raise funds for the organization, but it rained heavily that day and the campaign was unsuccessful. The next year, Susan G. Komen for the Cure awarded its first research grant of \$28,000 to Gary Spitzer, a physician at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, for breast cancer treatment research.

Brinker organized the first Susan G. Komen Race for Cure event in 1983, which she used as a positive way to raise awareness about breast cancer and celebrate breast cancer survivors. About 800 people participated in that event, which was held in Dallas. Race for the Cure was Brinker's idea of a fundraising event that many people would participate in. Over time, it became the largest fundraising event for breast cancer in the world. Brinker's organization Susan G. Komen grew every year, as more people found out about it through various programs including Race for Cure. The same year, Brinker was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a double mastectomy, a surgical removal of breast tissue from both breasts, and chemotherapy.

Brinker was appointed to the National Cancer Advisory Board by former US president Ronald Reagan in 1986. The National Cancer Advisory Board is a group of eighteen people appointed by the president to oversee cancer research funded by the National Institute of Health. Through her position on the Board, Brinker continued to bring attention to breast cancer by speaking in favor of increasing national funding for breast cancer research. In 1990 Brinker was appointed as the head of the President's Cancer Panel. There Brinker oversaw the National Cancer Program, which is the federal program that provides funding for cancer research. Brinker divorced her second husband in 2000.

In 2001, Brinker was invited to a White House roundtable on breast cancer and stepped away from her active leadership at Susan G. Komen to serve as a government official. The same year, former president Bush appointed her as the twenty-third US Ambassador to Hungary. Brinker served in that position for two years. As Ambassador, Brinker raised breast cancer awareness in Hungary by creating Bridge of Health Alliance. At the time, many women in Hungary were dying from breast cancer, one of the leading causes of death. Brinker's Bridge of Health Alliance addressed that by creating facilities and spreading information about breast cancer to women in Hungary.

In 2007, Brinker was appointed the White House Chief of Protocol, which enabled her to advise the president and vice-president on national and international diplomacy. In that position, she attended many meetings with the president and participated in outreach programs to better the relationships with the Diplomatic Corps, or the foreign diplomats in the US.

Due to her contribution to breast cancer awareness around the world, Brinker received many awards throughout her life. In 2008, she was named one of the hundred most influential people by TIME magazine. In 2009, she received a Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor, from US president Barack Obama for her contribution to breast cancer awareness. The same year, she was appointed as the World Health Organization's Goodwill Ambassador for Cancer Control, a role she used to raise awareness about cancer in developing countries and represent the United Nations on that topic. In 2010, Brinker published her autobiography, *Promise Me*. As of 2017, Brinker is the Chair of Global Strategy at Susan G. Komen and the WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Cancer Control.

Sources

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