

A Twin's Healing Gift

When Naomi Whinnie lost her breasts to cancer, sister Nina Hildebrand donated her own tissue to remake them

Like many identical twins, Naomi DeSalvo Whinnie and Nina DeSalvo Hildebrand, 44, have always leaned on each other. Growing up in Ebensburg, Pa., “we shared clothes, we shared makeup. We shared a bed till we were out of the house. We didn’t need anyone else,” Whinnie says.

So when Whinnie, a stay-at-home mom of two, was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer in June '05, Hildebrand couldn't let her go it alone. This October, after two mastectomies, chemo, radiation and a failed implant attempt that left Whinnie's chest looking “like a shark took a giant chunk out of my body,” her twin donated stomach tissue to help rebuild her breasts—and got a tummy tuck in the bargain.

Hildebrand, left, and Whinnie with surgeons James E. Craigie and Robert J. Allen, right, one day post-surgery.



“I didn’t think twice,” says Hildebrand (left, with Whinnie at Whinnie’s Johnstown, Pa., home last month). “I knew that my sister would do the same for me.”

At the East Cooper Regional Medical Center in Charleston, S.C., a seven-hour reconstruction was performed on Whinnie, whose skin had been too damaged by radiation treatment to stretch over an implant. Though Whinnie had too little stomach flesh to re-create her own C-cup breasts, Hildebrand, a mom of three, was 10 lbs. heavier and “had tissue to spare,” says her surgeon,

Robert J. Allen, who had performed two previous breast reconstructions with tissue from a twin. In an advanced procedure called a DIEP flap—which can be done using a patient’s own flesh or flesh donated by a genetically identical twin—Dr. Allen removed skin and fat from Hildebrand, opened Whinnie’s

mastectomy scars and attached the tissue, then “shaped the flaps to make them look good,” he says.

After the long ordeal for the sisters and their families (Whinnie’s husband, Cliff, a supervisor at a machinery company, and Hildebrand’s husband, B.J., a manager for a building supply distributor), who live in Johnstown, Pa., the surgeries seemed like a vacation. The patients insisted on staying in the same hospital room, where they wore matching pajamas. “I kept her up all night long saying, ‘Look, I have boobs!’” says Whinnie.

Now cancer-free, Whinnie says, “I think about my mortality every day.” But her sister’s gesture makes living with uncertainty easier. “Now I have a piece of her with me all the time,” Whinnie says, “next to my heart.” ●

