

Breast Cancer Action's Barbara Brenner dies



Photo Credit: Katy Raddatz, The Chronicle

Under Barbara Brenner's leadership, Breast Cancer Action coined the term "pinkwashing."

By Victoria Colliver

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Barbara Brenner, longtime health activist, civil rights attorney and former executive director of San Francisco's Breast Cancer Action, died Friday at her home in San Francisco of complications associated with ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

Ms. Brenner, who twice survived breast cancer only to be diagnosed with ALS in 2010, was 61.

Known for her intellect, acerbic wit and compassion, Ms. Brenner, who was diagnosed with breast cancer for the first time at 41, took over as head of the fledging Breast Cancer Action in 1995 and turned it into a national organization that focused on causes and prevention of the disease rather than just awareness, screening and treatment.

Under her leadership, the group coined the term "pinkwashing," which applies to the practice of slapping pink ribbons on products that may not generate money for research and may even harm women's health. In 2002, the group launched the controversial Think Before You Pink campaign to encourage people to question whether purchasing a product with a pink ribbon on it actually helps combat breast cancer.

Ms. Brenner's interest in activism was sparked when her mother took her at age 10 to a civil rights march, where she heard the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. speak.

Raised in Baltimore by liberal Jewish parents, Ms. Brenner was the third of seven siblings. She was active in the anti-Vietnam War movement at Smith College and came out as a lesbian in graduate school at Princeton University, where she met Suzanne Lampert, her partner of 38 years.

The couple moved to Los Angeles, where Ms. Brenner worked with the women's rights project of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. The experience led her to pursue a law degree at UC Berkeley and work as a public policy lawyer until her breast cancer diagnosis in 1993. She underwent a mastectomy after the disease recurred in 1996.

Gayle Sulik, medical sociologist and author of the book "Pink Ribbon Blues," described Ms. Brenner as "powerful, at times obstreperous."

"She never seemed to be afraid to call things as she saw them, and it didn't seem to matter who got upset about it," Sulik said in a statement. "Barbara reminded us that sometimes it takes ruffling a few feathers to dislodge complacency."

Even after ALS robbed her of her voice, Ms. Brenner sparred with the head of the ALS clinical trials program for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration over policies she believed didn't serve patients. She communicated through a text-to-speech app on her iPad and wrote about ALS, breast cancer and her health struggles on her blog, Healthy Barbs.

"I have been blessed to lead a rich life, full of love and culture and travel and work that had meaning for me," she wrote in her final blog, posted May 8. "I have no regrets except that I got ALS in the first place."

Ms. Brenner received numerous awards, including a Jefferson Award for Public Service in 2007, and last year was honored with the Smith College Medal by her alma mater and the ACLU of Northern California's Lola Hanzel Courageous Advocacy Award.

In addition to her partner, Ms. Brenner is survived by her siblings, all of whom live in the greater Baltimore area: Joseph Brenner, Mark Brenner, Nanci Grail, Richard Brenner and Lawrence Brenner. She was predeceased by her sister Ruth Newman, as well as her parents.

Services have been held.

Donations may be made to the Barbara Brenner Rapid Response Fund at Breast Cancer Action, a fund that will support program activities that address crucial emerging issues in breast cancer. For more information, visit www.bcaction.org.

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