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She's a voice for awareness

* Her breast cancer diagnosis led pop singer Soraya to help get an urgent message out to the Latino community.

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For a time, it seemed nothing could go wrong for award-winning singer-songwriter Soraya. The Colombian pop star's songs were topping the charts on Latin American and U.S. Spanish-language radio stations. She had toured with Alanis Morissette, Michael Bolton and Sting, and in two weeks was going to begin another two-year tour.

Then came the crushing news.

The singer, then 31, was diagnosed with breast cancer. The news was even more devastating because her grandmother, mother and maternal aunt had died of the disease. The diagnosis forced Soraya to put her music career on hold and spend most of the next two years fighting for her life.

Today, after undergoing treatment and a mastectomy, Soraya at 34 is cancer-free. She is a spokeswoman for breast cancer groups, talking to Latinas about the need for preventive screening and regular breast care. There's a strong need for her message, especially among lower-income Latinas who, for a variety of reasons, are not always well-informed about breast cancer prevention and treatment.

Some Latinas are reluctant to get screened because breast cancer is considered shameful. "It's a disgrace, almost like having a sexually transmitted disease or a crazy aunt in the attic," said David Hayes-Bautista, professor of medicine and director of Latino Health and Culture at the UCLA Geffen School of Medicine. Cultural barriers, poverty and inadequate access to screening and treatment are reasons Latinas are more likely to die of breast cancer than white women.

By helping to raise awareness, Soraya and other activists are helping to alleviate some of these problems, said Hayes-Bautista. "The more this gets brought out publicly, the better," he says. "However, if we continue to raise awareness without addressing the structural issues of access to screening and treatment, we'll still have a problem."

Soraya, who was born in New Jersey, spent her first eight years in Colombia before moving back to the U.S. She now calls Miami home. In Los Angeles recently to record a CD and music video, Soraya talked to The Times about her efforts to raise public awareness of the disease.

Talk about the moment you learned you had breast cancer. You were about to leave on a tour. Your bags were packed. The band was ready. And you got a call?

Contracts were signed. Appearances were scheduled. And everything froze. I had to cancel all of it and tell my record company. Then, because I worried about how the media would present my story, I decided I needed to get the message out in my words. I made a two-minute video in my backyard and explained that I'd been diagnosed with breast cancer. I asked for prayers and for help in finding a cure for this disease.

The video got quite a response?

It was picked up everywhere, all over the Anglo and Latino media. I was stunned. After it aired, we received more than 6,000 e-mails in four days from women and men offering their support, sharing their stories and asking for help. I saw how much need there was in the Latino community for someone to be public about this.

How did people in your industry react to the diagnosis?

In the beginning, certain people I worked with didn't want me to mention the breast cancer. Sex appeal is a big part of what's used to sell records, and they were afraid this would affect that. They were afraid it would put people off, but it did just the opposite.

And how did you cope initially with the reality that you had cancer?

For the first weeks, I just went from test to test, scan to scan. I felt sad and broken. But I had this great team of doctors, and after a few weeks we had a plan. I told myself I couldn't stay like this. I needed to ask the right questions, learn what I needed to

learn and figure out how to stay strong, positive and focused.

You saw what happened to your mother and grandmother, and were already a spokeswoman for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation when you got the diagnosis. Did that seem ironic to you?

My involvement with the foundation was more a blessing than an irony. Right after my diagnosis, one of my first calls was to [foundation founder] Nancy Brinker. She gave me a lot of confidence and pointed me to the best doctors in my area. If there was any irony, it was that this hit me when I was at the epitome of good health: I was running three to five miles a day, getting good rest, eating well, and I was only 31.

Although you were very aware of breast cancer, your cancer was fairly far along. How did that happen?

I've been practicing breast self-exam since my teens. I'd felt other small changes in my breast before, always had them checked out and they were normal. This lump came on very fast. I was in the shower, and felt it under my arm. It was a Friday. I called the doctor that day and said, "I need to see you Monday."

When was that?

June 5, 2000. Diagnosis: Stage 3 cancer.

What did your treatment involve?

Everything. I had a mastectomy with reconstruction. Because the lump was under the arm, some of the lymph nodes were involved, which is what made the cancer Stage 3. Doctors took all the lymph nodes. After surgery, I had radiation and a year of chemotherapy. I also changed my diet and now eat pretty much a macrobiotic diet.

How are you now?

My prognosis was very dark at first. But I reacted well to treatment and broke through all the doctor's expectations. It was an aggressive cancer and we treated it aggressively. We pushed it back as quickly as it crept up. Now I go day by day and get checked regularly. So far I've been cancer-free for a year. I've seen women who have survived worse, so I know long-term survival is possible.

Where did you find support to help you through this ordeal?

I'm close to my dad and brother. They've been a solid support, along with my extended family. I'm divorced and have no kids, but I have a few good friends I really rely on. My faith in God also keeps me going.

Another source of strength is the sisterhood within the breast cancer community. When I go out and speak to groups of survivors, that strengthens me. I'm also very lucky I have this outlet called songwriting. Many times, when I didn't know who to talk to or didn't feel like talking, I'd sit with my guitar. I played every day.

Is public awareness today different from when your mother or grandmother had cancer?

Neither my mother nor my grandmother was ever taught to do self-examination, and that's changing. Slowly, too, more people are talking about breast cancer and some of the stigma is starting to go away. What's still lacking is access to screening, and the awareness that makes it OK for women to get tested.

What else do Latinas need to know?

There's still a large segment of Latinas who, because of religious, social, cultural and economic reasons, don't get the care they need. For example, many feel it's not proper to examine their own breasts or let anyone touch their bodies, especially a male doctor. Others believe if they have a lump, they'd rather leave the matter in God's hands than get help.... The biggest problem is that because so many are diagnosed at a late stage, every woman these people have ever known who has gotten breast cancer has died. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. They don't yet believe that you can have breast cancer and survive.

How are you changing that?

I give talks in Latin America and women come forward and admit for the first time that they have breast cancer or are breast cancer survivors. If my face is on the cover of a magazine, and people think, "Oh, she's the one who got breast cancer," that's good. I've started a dialogue. I've made it OK to talk about. They're getting the message that if you're a woman, you're at risk. And I am showing them that life goes on.

Do people see you now as a hero?

The other day I visited a single mom who lives in Santa Ana and

has breast cancer. She was low-income, uninsured, was working, raising kids all by herself and going through treatments. At no point did I ever have to work through this ordeal. I have information, insurance, the best doctors, no kids, and it's still hard. I don't think I'm a hero. She's the hero.

Information on breast cancer and sites for low-cost screening exams is available in Spanish and English at www.komen.org, or by calling the national Breast Care Helpline at (800) 462-9273.

PHOTO: (no caption)

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BREAST CANCER

HISPANICS

SORAYA (SINGER)