

YOU ARE ENOUGH!

RECLAIMING YOUR CAREER AND YOUR LIFE
WITH PURPOSE, PASSION,
AND UNAPOLOGETIC AUTHENTICITY



CHARLENE WHEELLESS

YOU ARE ENOUGH! chronicles Charlene Wheelless's fearless quest to be the best possible version of herself in every aspect of her life—at work and at home. For Charlene, this means busting up stereotypes, breaking down barriers, and flat-out refusing to be ignored, pigeonholed, or forgotten.

Using blog posts from her courageous battle with breast cancer, lectures from her popular “Lessons from Being Invisible” speaking series, and personal accounts of her climb to being one of the first Black female executives in traditionally White and male-dominated industries, Charlene's voice is one that resonates across every spectrum—a voice that demands to be heard.

Charlene's experiences serve as a compass for individuals and corporations looking to change their course, alter their patterns, and expand their ways of thinking and being. With raw honesty, blazing courage, and solution-driven sensibility, Charlene reminds us that despite the setbacks, struggles, and obstacles life throws our way, we can be seen. We must not be invisible. We must be our own authentic selves. In short: We are enough!

PRAISE FOR *YOU ARE ENOUGH!*

“Plenty of people offer advice. Few offer wisdom. By sharing her life and experiences, Charlene Wheeless invites readers on a remarkable journey of self-discovery to gain profound insights along the way. Hers is a powerful, empowering voice and an important one for our times. This is a book for everyone. Everyone who reads this book will be enriched.”

PHILLIP BARLAG,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WORLD 50

“Charlene is a remarkable person, and there is something each of us can learn from her experience. Her stories are full of examples of her tenacity in facing the kind of adversity that comes from having to fight for everything you have, but doing it with grace, smarts, and authenticity. It is these characteristics that Charlene brought to her most difficult battle—facing and fighting cancer. For so many people, being diagnosed with cancer and dealing with this horrible disease is a transformational event. Some people are overtaken by the trauma of dealing with it, but *You Are Enough!* reminds us all that we are in charge of ourselves and that our response to and way we cope with these challenges are within our own control. So, thank you, Charlene, for the gift of these lessons and for being so brave in putting it all out there so we can apply these lessons to our own lives.”

MARGERY KRAUS,
FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN, APCO WORLDWIDE

“ All those executives reading Isabel Wilkerson and Robin Diangelo to understand why their Black employees are so angry now need to add Charlene Wheeless to their bedside tables. She is a ‘first Black woman to’ many times over. And while she isn’t a whiner and has no regrets, she offers a view of corporate America that will open your eyes. The fact that she had to con- front cancer, as well, only adds to this mini-memoir’s power. ”

ALAN MURRAY,
CEO, FORTUNE MEDIA

“ You Are Enough! is elegant in its straightforwardness. It is sensitively written, albeit raw. Charlene shares in a way that made me feel fully accepted as she recounted her intimate story, and also made me feel like I was intruding at the same time. The book is honest, genuine, courageous, and at all times REAL, and by the way—it is very smartly written. I loved it. ”

BILL HEYMAN,
CEO, HEYMAN ASSOCIATES EXECUTIVE SE ARCH

“ This is a stirring tale of a brilliant communicator and cancer survivor who has made the most of her life in every way. ”

RICHARD EDELMAN,
PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
EDELMAN PUBLIC RELATIONS

“With a level of candor, transparency, and, yes, authenticity that will surprise you, Charlene Wheelless dispenses sound advice for living that all of us can learn from. Her personal story had already inspired me—and I know her well as a leader, colleague, and friend—but there are new details here that brought tears to my eyes and nourishment to my soul. I promise you will love this book.”

ROGER BOLTON,
CEO, PAGE SOCIETY

“This book is super-relevant at any time, but especially during an unprecedented period when everyone is reassessing their lives and reprioritizing their purpose and career. Charlene’s honest and reflective story of resilience in the face of serious health setbacks and refusal to accept the limitations that societal norms and conventions place on her is inspiring to every- one. She encourages women, in particular, to be their authentic selves in the workplace but to also recognize when to make pragmatic trade-offs to get results.

Everyone dreams about what might have been or what could be: Charlene’s practical and down-to-earth advice tells us how to get out there and achieve our potential. As we reassess our values and respond to an extraordinary time in world history, *You Are Enough!* is the perfect guide to living in the moment and not waiting for a mythical tomorrow that never comes. It is a great primer for both work and life.”

STEVE BARRETT,
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, *PR WEEK US*

YOU ARE
ENOUGH!



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You Are Enough!

***Reclaiming Your Career and Your Life
with Purpose, Passion, and Unapologetic Authenticity***

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I have tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from my memories of them. In order to protect the anonymity of people, places, and companies, in most instances, I have refrained from naming individuals, places, and corporations and other identifying information. The content in this book is built from life and work experiences, and, in some cases, events and content from these events serve as the spark for the creation of my “Lessons.” Although I provide many stories and examples in the book, they are not necessarily in chronological order. This is to prevent any intentional or unintentional identification of a workplace or a company.

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To my mother, Dorthy Lockhart, also known as Bobbie Jean Long. I could not have done this without you. I am the person I am because of you. I miss you always and will love and respect you forever. To the other loves of my life, my husband, Greg, and my daughters, Jené and Savannah, you had me at “Hello.”

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“What is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”

MARY OLIVER, “THE SUMMER DAY”

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I thank God for all of you and for everything that has led me right here. Through Him, at this moment, I am exactly where I am supposed to be.

INTRODUCTION

“You alone are enough.
You have nothing to prove to anybody.”
MAYA ANGELOU

I have great respect and admiration for Dr. Angelou (may she rest in peace). But nearly my whole life, and like many women and minorities, I have always had to prove myself or prove something to someone, sometimes for reasons I didn't even understand, let alone accept.

I'm tired. Fatigued, really. It's the fatigue of being excluded or made to feel invisible. In my personal life and in the corporate world, these emotional burdens have been prominent for as long as I can remember. It began as I was growing up learning how to be a little Black girl in a society that determined my value, and later as I started building my career, and later still, when I defied the odds and reached professional success. For years, I worked within the system, even if the system didn't work for me. I learned what behaviors were rewarded and how to uplift and inspire others, even as I was feeling pushed down. I mustered all the strength, fearlessness, resilience, and tenacity I could, every single day, to go along to get along. I turned myself inside out to be who “they”

wanted me to be. Authenticity is great, but it wasn't paying the bills. Working hard to fit in and distancing myself from negative stereotypes—that worked. But that was before. Before I got tired. And, before I had cancer.

As I advanced in my career, I began sharing my experiences. I would speak to small and large groups of men and women about the price of exclusion and the lessons I'd learned from being invisible. Every time, the audience would start out a bit doubtful, but it never took more than one or two minutes before people were nodding in agreement, many having an acute and deeply personal understanding of the message I was delivering. Sometimes people would approach me and ask, "Why are you talking about exclusion or being invisible? What do you know about being overlooked and ignored? You're successful, and the 'big guys' like you, so what do you have to worry about?" My answer: Everything. Just because someone has reached a level of success and appears to have shattered a glass ceiling, that does not mean they aren't experiencing blatant, conscious, and unconscious bias. It does not mean that the road has somehow become easier. That road is just *different* and often harder. The exclusion itself becomes more subtle, but it is no less painful. Each instance in isolation seems insignificant, but the significance grows with repetition. My stories, and most likely some of yours, did not unfold occasionally; they happened fairly regularly, often every day.

For me, they slowly piled up in my mind, and I found myself pushing them aside to focus on later. I learned to grin and bear it, or worse yet, to ignore what was happening because it wasn't worth it to react. Combine these forces and accumulated delay tactics, and you realize that with the repetition comes doubt. I started to believe things about myself, minorities, and women that I knew were not true. Over time, these misplaced beliefs began to erode my self-esteem and led me to question myself. If you hear or feel something often enough, you begin to believe it. The issues are systemic. Today, we call it "White privilege," and often "White *male* privilege." Here are just a few examples of how these unseen forces became startlingly visible in my own life:

- I refrained from speaking up in meetings because my ideas were frequently discounted by colleagues, only to be accepted and agreed upon when a man repeated my words a few minutes later. We've all been in that meeting when you say something you believe is important, and no one says a word or reacts. Radio silence. Then, a man repeats your words or, worse, says, "What I think she means is . . ." as though I were incapable of speaking for myself.
- I walked into meeting after meeting where other women or minorities numbered zero to three. I always counted—whether there were ten or a hundred people—and tracked when there were enough people who looked

like me so that I would feel comfortable. Experts have said that gender only stops being an issue when the group of women comprise at least one-third of the audience.

- Men tended to look past or over me when standing in a group as though I weren't there at all.
- Some people discounted me because, to them, I was too young or too girly to be taken seriously only to change their behavior when they realized I was the senior person in the room. When I served as a senior vice president for a technology company, an executive colleague told me that he was pleasantly surprised that I wasn't an "empty suit." I wonder how many men had been told that? As women, we aren't allowed to be pretty and smart: we must pick one.

- And one of my “favorite” diminishments: When a man across the executive table winks at me as though to say, “Don’t worry, little girl, I’ll watch out for you.” That’s not mentoring; it’s patronizing.

Maybe I did shatter the glass ceiling hindering the advancement of women, but I was to be confronted with the concrete wall; a barrier to success unique to women of color. Glass is tough, but you can break it, and you can see through it to the level above, so you know that there is something to aspire to. If you can see it, you can achieve it. Concrete, on the other hand, is impenetrable, and it blocks your vision so you cannot see how to get to the next level or even if there is a next level that is available to you.

So, what are we supposed to do? Give up? No. We learn to cope, and then we learn to thrive. We gain strength, and we learn lessons that give us the power and the fire to forge what’s next.

Why this book, and why now?

I’m a country music fan. Well, that’s not altogether true. I’m a Darius fan (country music’s Darius Rucker, not Darius of Hootie & the Blow- fish, although he’s good, too). I have nearly every record he’s made, but one of his songs stands out. The words, for me, are profound. They are my anthem. The song is “This,” and a part of the chorus: *“For every stop- light I didn’t make, every chance I did or I didn’t take—all the doors that I had to close, all the things I knew but didn’t know, Thank God for all I missed, ’cause it led me here to this.”* It’s actually a love song. But it hits the right chord for me and where I am in life. Everything that I have or haven’t done or that has happened to me, for me, against me, or around me has led me to this moment and prepared me to tell my story.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer in February 2017, I felt like I was at the top of my game. But I knew something was wrong. Your body tells you when it’s had enough. Mine certainly did. But, like many women or people in general, I wasn’t listening. I didn’t stop and listen until I had to. Cancer gave me no other choice.

I didn’t just decide to write a book. I felt that I had to write a book. I was in crisis, and as any good crisis manager will tell you, “Never waste a good crisis.” I wanted to tell people about breast cancer and especially the challenges of navigating life after treatment, with most of the content coming from my blog, justbetweenusgirrls.com. The blog is an unfolding of the experiences, emotions, and feelings I encountered during my illness and immediately after cancer treatment. Its purpose was simply to help as many people as possible by giving me a platform for sharing my cancer journey of finding strength in weakness and learning to put more life in my life. I wanted to share my story in hopes that it would help people who had been touched by cancer in some way. I wanted to understand and help others understand the process of getting back to

their old selves. (Spoiler alert: You'll never be your old self again.) I have included some pertinent blog posts after some of the chapters (edited for concision and clarity) that show you how my journey unfolded.

My publisher, of whom I'm quite fond, told me that cancer memoirs are a dime a dozen. Those may not have been his exact words, but you get my point. I cannot say that he was unenthusiastic because he was positive about the book. But what I wanted was for him to be ecstatic. He was not. Later, on a call with an acquaintance who is a serial entrepreneur, I was again asked about my book. This time I got a more interesting response. That is to say, he said it was an interesting idea. Then he asked the million-dollar question: "What do you hope to get out of the book?"

I thought about it for a little while, and I told him that I had a lot to say. "Like what?" he asked. I responded, "Well, there is the cancer piece and how one of the strongest women I know [me] was thrown into a massive loop of depression, self-doubt, insecurity, and a near-total loss of identity because of cancer, and how ill-prepared she was for what was ahead of her once treatment was over."

That was when the hardest work started for me. I looked for resources but felt that no one was telling the whole truth—like how after treatment, nearly everyone you run into says some version of how you must feel great for beating cancer. So, you give the proper, acceptable response and nod in agreement. Well, no, I didn't feel great. I wanted to jump off a bridge. I wanted to die, just not from cancer. I had done everything right: I fought for my life; I had both of my breasts cut off; I sat for six hours in a chair several times while poisonous chemicals were pumped into my body; I was radiated day after day for more than a month; and when I was finally ready to come up for air, I no longer remembered the life I had and didn't understand the life I was in.

"I also wanted to talk about topics that had nothing to do with cancer," I told him. Like the challenges of working as a Black woman executive where words like *meritocracy*, *diversity*, and *inclusion* are the buzz words—spoken to me more times than I can count—that in reality are too often empty and benign words. *Diversity* and *inclusion* are not words about business; they are terms about people. Every statistic is a person, a professional, doing their best to be the best and often on an uneven playing field. The Reverend Jesse Jackson once told me, "Without transparency there can be no equality. If not everyone knows the rules, the playing field can never be even." He was right then, and he continues to be right today as I type these words.

And once I thought about writing the book even more, I realized I wanted to write this book to talk about women of color at work and how the massive hidden and blatant inequities that existed sixty, twenty, and ten years ago still happen today. I want

people, especially women and other marginalized and disenfranchised groups, to know that success requires a degree of fearlessness. You must be resilient for a whole lot of reasons, but it is essential if you are going to be fearless. Be tenacious about what you want. And always be authentic.

I realized that I had gotten a little carried away, but my advisor on the other end of the phone said, “Charlene, this is your book. Put all of that together and tell your story. Share your lessons because they are both career and life lessons, and you are right: people need to hear them.” So, that is how this book came to fruition. I shared the new view with the publisher, and he was as close to ecstatic as I think I was going to get from him. And it was enough.

Throughout this book, I share the lessons I’ve curated throughout my career and life to help you push through barriers and come out the other side stronger and better. Some are profound, some you have most likely heard before, but each one has its own take, and maybe, just maybe, my view will speak to you in a new way. The relevant blog entries share how these career lessons became life lessons. They may not always seem to fit in at first, but eventually you will see their point. You see, the strength I gained in learning those career lessons also prepared me for my battle with cancer and, ultimately, my recovery. Of course, I didn’t know that all this self-preparation was going on at the time over the years. As a person of faith, I’ve always believed the plan for my life is in God’s hands and that He is always preparing me for something. I didn’t know that it would be for the fight of my life when I was fifty-three and for my life after that. But here we are.

So, come and join me on this journey. The life lessons I share in this book come from me, but I want them to belong to all of us.

CHAPTER ONE

THIS IS ME

“I can be changed by what happens to me,
but I refuse to be reduced by it.”

MAYA ANGELOU

Statistics have been a presence in my life from the day I came into this world. I was born in Oakland, California. We lived in Sobrante Park, a neighborhood Black families moved to in the 1960s in pursuit of the American Dream. By the time I was old enough to be aware of my surroundings—a struggling community bordered on two sides by railroad tracks—it had begun a rapid decline and was considered by many synonymous with gangs, drug dealing, shootouts, and body bags. Children could not play outside in the park for fear of being caught in the crossfire of a turf dispute or running into a drug deal. At one point in the 1980s, Sobrante Park was considered a center of crack cocaine dealing in East Oakland.

I don't remember much about my childhood. I was raised by two parents, one of them loving and protective (my mother) and one of them an angry alcoholic (my

father) who liked to take his anger out on my mother verbally and physically. It does something to a kid to see the most important person in her life being physically abused repeatedly. It teaches you, or at least reinforces, what people see as the value (or lack thereof) of women. When you're that young, you don't have the mental capacity to understand what is really happening and what it all means. My oldest brother would sometimes call the police when things were especially violent, but in those days, the officers would just come into the house, briefly look around, and say something like, "Try to get along better."

I remember the sounds my mother used to make when the fights were over. They were the sounds of whimpering and misery. I will never forget those sounds, and to this day, loud voices unnerve me. Because of those experiences, I rarely raise my own voice. In adulthood, I still can't shake the feeling that loud voices signal the potential for physical or emotional violence.

Around 1971, I was one of thousands of girls in the United States who was sexually assaulted. Like so many others, something was done to me that no one has ever apologized for. It never leaves you. Worse, it's yet another lesson about the value (or devaluation) of girls in the world. You believe it's inherently your fault. It never occurs to you, at seven years old, that you are the victim. And while the aggressor goes on with his/her life, you carry the burden your entire life. There is no getting over it. Today, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) estimates that a child in the United States is sexually assaulted every nine minutes.

By the time I was in seventh grade, according to the many national statistics, I was more likely to be a teen mom than graduate from high school. But I defied those statistics. In 1981, I beat the odds by becoming the first and only person in my family to go to college, and I worked two and sometimes three jobs to be there. There were to be other statistics ahead that I could have never anticipated, too. I became a statistical anomaly; an outlier. The first Black this and the first Black female that. I've been complimented for being articulate, as though that is an accomplishment, and for being nonthreatening. I'm 5'6"-ish and 135 pounds (I didn't break 100 pounds until I was twenty-three), so how threatening could I be?

My first executive job came in the 1990s, when I was promoted to vice president of corporate communications and an officer of a multibillion-dollar company. I was not the first female to hold that job or the first female to be named VP at that company, but I was the first Black female executive there, and again at several other global companies over the years. I am proud of my achievements, but it was also disheartening that in the twenty-first century, there were still more firsts, by me and many, many other women

who are more successful than me. It's isolating, being the one and only. I used to get frustrated by the isolation until I realized the importance of the achievement—that if there is one (me), there can be others. It starts with one.

My mother ultimately left my father when I was around eight years old. Broke, Black, and female, with three sons and me in tow, she just left. She worked two jobs so we could eat and have what we needed. She wasn't home much, but she did the best she could with what she had. My brothers spent more time with my dad. I spent no time with him by the time I turned ten. The next time I saw my father, I was twenty-one years old, and he told me I looked "familiar" and asked me if we had met before. The next time after that was at my mother's funeral some years later. I was married by then and pregnant with my first child. He recognized me this time, and we even took a picture together. But he was never interested in getting to know me or in being a part of my life, even though he maintained relationships with my three brothers. I never knew why I didn't matter to him. His rejection put a hole in my heart that I carried with me every day until he died in 2008. I was forty-four years old when he died, and I finally felt free. I stopped searching for the answer because the one person who could provide it was gone.

My mother was an amazing woman who worked hard so that I could have a better life. I will always drive hard to succeed because any success I achieve is for her and because of her. When people ask me what motivates me, the answer is simple: my mother. After all she endured, my success is how I thank her. It's how I honor her selflessness. How dare I not try my best given all she had been through for me? By her actions, she taught me to be fearless—to draw strength from knowing that my purpose was greater than my fear—and to be resilient: she did not let my father's behavior break her. She taught me to be tenacious, always. Fight for what I want. Don't give up. She never did.

And, yes, she gave me "the talk" that nearly all Black children get: "Never forget that you have to work twice as hard and be twice as good in order to be considered equal . . . and sometimes, even that won't be enough." It sounds like a cliché, but it's always been true. I've spoken those same words to my adult children. Although my mother died more than twenty-six years ago, her words and actions still affect me. They have fueled me to turn any adversity into wisdom, to be stronger than the bias, and to know when to walk away. In going to college and earning three degrees, to building a successful career, and maintaining an intact family, I am her legacy.

I should not have been surprised when I became yet another statistic in 2017. According to the American Cancer Society, I was one of 316,120 women and men

in the United States who were told they had breast cancer. That's about 866 women a day who sat in a doctor's office or spoke with a doctor on the phone and, after hearing the word "cancer," heard nothing else. No doubt they were numb, even if they already suspected that it was cancer. Maybe she had someone with her to hold her hand, to be the ears that she needed at that moment. Or maybe she was alone. Out of all 316,120 women diagnosed with breast cancer in 2017, on February 20, I was concerned with just one—me.

I was in a business meeting when my phone rang. Normally, I wouldn't have taken the call, but I knew it was my doctor. I knew that I needed to take this one. I excused myself, stood in the hallway, and listened as my doctor said that yes, it was cancer. I said, "Okay." That's it, just okay. She said, "It's early stage, Stage 1, and there's only one tumor." I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Should I call someone? I left the meeting. Feeling tears beginning to burn behind my eyes, I went to my office, packed up my things, and went home. I called my doctor back and, always in problem-solving mode, said, "Okay, what's next?"

Over the next few days, I had several tests that gave me the definitive answer. I had Stage 2 cancer, and it had spread to my lymph nodes. I needed surgery. I was in my car, racing home to grab my luggage for a business trip. The trip was all I could think about. I knew how to have a successful business trip. I didn't know how to have cancer.

Six months earlier, I'd had a mammogram. I had a few spots that were questionable, but that wasn't unusual. There were biopsies performed, and everything was benign. I was told to go on about my business, which I did. Six months later, I was in my doctor's office again to get a referral for more tests. I needed more biopsies; a mammogram two days earlier found a few "concerning" spots. At this point, I was still more bothered than worried. After all, I had a lot to do that day. In the process of performing a quick breast exam so she could write the order, my doctor found a lump the size of a pea on my left breast near the nipple. It hadn't shown up on the mammogram. She performed a biopsy on "the pea" while I was in her office. It was Friday afternoon.

She looked concerned, so I felt concerned. Every spot on the mammogram turned out to be benign once again. But not the pea. The pea was the entrance fee to join a club that I never wanted to be a member of, and still don't. Like so many things in my life, it wasn't my choice. I tell this story because I know too many hard-charging, successful women who put off their mammograms because they are too busy with work, with their careers. I get it, but I also want to deliver this urgent message: You are never too busy to prevent your own premature death.

I have been a corporate communications professional and business executive for

thirty-three years. My career choices have led me to industries that are overwhelmingly male and even more overwhelmingly White, such as oil and gas, defense, aerospace, technology, engineering—you get the point. In my last position, I led corporate affairs for a global \$40-billion-a-year company, one of the most respected companies in the world in its industry. It was a great, lucrative job, and I walked away—mentally even before physically. I've been honored to receive many awards for my work and for outstanding leadership in and out of the C-suite. I always strive to be the best, achieving some level of success yet still feeling left out or that I do not measure up. To what? Usually, to someone else's idea of who I should or shouldn't be, or what I am or am not capable of, or my value as a professional and, sometimes, even as a person.

After my time in the corporate world, after a nearly three-year battle with cancer, and one visit to an Oprah event, I have reached a point in my life that has been eluding me for as long as I can remember: I have come to understand and believe something that is freaking mind-blowing. I. AM. ENOUGH. And I want you to know and feel that you are enough, too.

I close this first chapter with a blog about surviving cancer. This blog was posted almost a year after I had finished chemotherapy.



BLOG POST

Am I a Survivor?

OCTOBER 18, 2018

I've always known I was a fighter, but a survivor? Not so much. My mother, now, she was a survivor. She fled a twenty-year abusive marriage with nothing but a high school education and four kids in tow, the youngest being around eight (me), and she created the best life she could. That's what I call a survivor. I'm sure without her will to survive, my life would have gone in a very different direction.

Lately, I've been thinking about the word "survivor" and what it really means in context with cancer. I guess I'm thinking about it more now than usual because

it's Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and everywhere I turn I see pink ribbons, pink hats, and lots of things that say "survivor" on them. With breast cancer, or any kind of cancer for that matter, I imagine it's important to identify yourself as a survivor as quickly as possible. It helps with the mental game. Some people consider themselves a survivor the minute they start treatment. Others see themselves as survivors the moment they've completed treatment. According to the National Cancer Institute, "You are a survivor on the day that you are diagnosed and throughout the rest of your life." It's a big question. One quick Google search of "Who is considered a breast cancer survivor?" resulted in 26,600,000 results in 0.55 seconds.

I think of survivor in literal terms. The dictionary says a survivor is a person "remaining after an event in which others have died." By that definition, I guess I'm a survivor, sort of. Forty-one thousand people die from breast cancer each year. I'm sure many of them thought of themselves as survivors. The problem is that for cancer people, there's always a "yet" in your head. I haven't died—yet. It reminds me of when one of my daughters was at that teenage rebellious stage. She would make a sassy statement, and I would think (and sometimes say to her), "Given the way you made that statement, go ahead and add 'dumb-shit' after it because that's what you want to say, such as 'leave me alone, dumb-shit!'" But I digress.

I'm finished with treatment, except for the revision of my first breast reconstruction surgery, and I'm on medication for the next seven years. Maybe after then I'll consider myself a survivor. But (there's always a "but"), as any cancer patient knows, cancer could come back at any time.

When I first finished treatment, people would ask me if I was all done and good as new or if I was cancer-free. The truth was that I had no idea if I was cancer-free, and I definitely wasn't good as new. The doctors went through the established protocol for treatment, and, based on that, the assumption was that I was cancer-free. Usually, I would just shrug and say, "I guess."

I visited my oncologist a couple of weeks ago, which is to say I had a medical appointment, but "visit" sounds so much nicer. Because of some strange side effects, she ordered a CT scan of my chest, abdomen, and pelvis. I guess if the cancer were to come back, that is where it is most likely to occur first. I had the scans done the following week and waited patiently for the results. Like anyone who has waited for test results, I kept telling myself that if it was something bad, she would call right away. No news is good news. Finally, I couldn't take it

anymore—it had been seven days, so I called the office. Her nurse put me on hold forever (which was actually less than two minutes) and came back and said, “You’re clear. There is no sign of metastasis.” So, there it was, I had my answer. I was cancer-free.

Some people celebrate their “cancerversary” (cancer anniversary), which can be quite arbitrary from a date standpoint, but they do so, nonetheless. No disrespect to those who do, but I just don’t see myself celebrating the day I was diagnosed or the day I finished treatment or anything else related to cancer because cancer will never be out of my life. Once you get it, you’re in the club forever.

On second thought, I might celebrate something special about cancer— the day I feel that cancer doesn’t define me. Sure, cancer has changed my perspective on life and most everything else, but the journey has given me the freedom to create the life I want rather than make the best of the life I had. I’ll probably write on this at some point, but not today. After I’ve really worked it out in my head and my heart because it’s deep. The day I start to truly embrace that power and create the life I want will be one of the most important days of my life, if not the most important. Now, that is worth celebrating.

I feel like I’m on the verge of it, in a good way. And, I’m making progress. I’m confident that cancer doesn’t completely define me and never will. I still don’t know for sure where this journey is leading me. But there is one thing I know for sure: there is no cancer in my body now. I am cancer-free!

Hi. My name is Charlene, and I’m a survivor.

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Charlene Wheelless is a renowned communications expert, author, speaker, and powerhouse in business and in life. She runs a strategic advisory firm, Charlene Wheelless, LLC, and is a senior advisor for equity and justice at APCO Worldwide, a global advisory and advocacy communications consultancy. An essential voice in the future of the communications profession, Charlene is the chairman of the board of trustees for Page Society, the world's leading professional association for senior public relations and corporate communications executives.



Charlene has lived the experience of being a Black female executive at several leading global companies. The accumulation of her experiences has positioned her as a cornerstone in driving anti-racist practices, inclusivity, diversity, and belonging in corporate environments. She is a gifted speaker and contributor to business and lifestyle publications, including Chief Executive, Business Insider, Chief Learning Officer, Thrive Global, and Fast Company, among others.

Charlene has been named one of the most influential PR professionals for five consecutive years, inducted into the PR Week Hall of Femme and the PR Global Powerbook, and was included in The Network Journal's 2017 25 Influential Black Women in Business. Charlene holds a BA in journalism and public relations, an MA in public communication, and an MBA. She resides in Northern Virginia with her husband and two dogs. She also has two adult daughters.