I met my wife, Lauren, the first night she moved to New York City. I was living in Manhattan too, and my friends, against my wishes, convinced me to go out. Lauren knew one of the other girls in our group. She slid in right across from me, and I just sort of felt something from that moment. At the end of the night, I went up to her and said, "I'd love to take you out—would you mind giving me your phone number?" Granted, this was 1994, but she looked at me and said, "I don’t have a phone." I said, "Something you should know about me: I don’t play games. I may be young—I’m 24 years old—but I’m really looking for a life partner. I’m not looking to play games or go through the motions of dating." And as I went on my diatribe, she just stared at me, smiling. And she said, "If you give me a minute to finish, I don’t have a phone because I just moved to New York City." I felt like the biggest idiot on the face of the earth, but nevertheless we started off with good humor. And from there we went out two weeks later. We dated for two years, we were engaged for one year, and then we were married in 1997. We have two girls.
Lauren was diagnosed with breast cancer in February of 2013. She was really young to be affected. She actually discovered her lump herself. She called with her diagnosis while I was at work. Lauren respected my commitment to my career; she knew my crazy job and how demanding it was. She was not the kind of wife to constantly call. But when she did call several times, you knew that something was wrong. So my phone was ringing off the hook, and I picked up the phone, knowing that this could not be good news. I could hear the nervousness and the hysterical tears on the other end. I thought about our two girls. I hopped in the car immediately. I called a friend who is an ob-gyn and had dealt with many cases of breast cancer. She started talking me through the diagnosis. At that point it was stage II, it had spread to the lymph nodes. Lauren ended up going through six rounds of chemotherapy, and then she had a double mastectomy. Then she had 42 rounds of radiation, and that was just by the end of 2013.

In early 2014 we found out the cancer had spread, and she had a brain tumor as well. They successfully removed the brain tumor, but in May of 2014 when she had her CAT scan, they determined that her cancer had metastasized to a stage IV diagnosis. Technically, they don’t up stages from II to IV, but it essentially became a metastasized breast cancer.

Lauren always insisted on putting on a strong front. It took a lot of convincing even to allow her very close friends to take her to chemo treatment—or anything for that matter. Many times she would go, and her friends would text me and say, "She was amazing, she was stellar, she was smiling, we were laughing." What they don’t know is Lauren would walk through the door, drop her leftovers on the ground, and, just an example, vomit all over the floor.

We didn’t openly discuss Lauren’s diagnosis with our daughters until we had a good idea of how things were going to progress. But that was only a matter of two months after the diagnosis. They didn’t ask many questions. We talked as much
as we could. And then once we realized it had metastasized, we would gradually have conversations with the girls about what all this means and how it can play out.

Nothing can prepare you for something like this. We have family and friends who have been just phenomenal. Everything from setting up meal trains to transporting kids around, to interviewing when I’m looking to hire a nanny, to still to this day getting weekly emails on the ongoing of children in the schools to make sure I’m not missing a beat as a single father. It’s all those elements that have helped pick up the pieces and sort of adjust to what we call our "new normal."

I look at the girls, and I see so much of Lauren in them. When you see glimpses of someone whom you loved and cared so much for, it actually does help. They remind me that their mom wouldn't tolerate shoes left out on the floor. They came up with the idea for a breast cancer charity called Desserts by Lauren, which benefits the Tower Cancer Research Foundation. They wanted to do something for the good of breast cancer research, and Lauren was a terrific baker. I know it's an outlet for them to pull out Lauren's MixMaster and go to town baking her brownies, her chocolate chip cookies, and her cheesecakes. Recently I noticed my younger daughter was moving around the kitchen with the exact same motions as Lauren. I sat there not getting a single thing done for an hour, just watching her.

Lauren was an amazing mom. She had an absolutely stunning smile with big, white, bright teeth. Perfect features. She had a continuous ability to always make people around her feel comfortable and put a smile on their face. At the same time, she had an edge to her: She was intolerant of nonsense. She had a very strong personality, a "spitfire" as I termed it, but we had a very balanced marriage in terms of key decision making. She taught us to live our lives in a very organized fashion. She also taught us manners: Say please and thank you to everyone you encounter, and treat everyone with respect and regardless of who
they are or where they stand in society. And give it your all. My older daughter plays for the high school tennis team, which is very frustrating at times. I can hear Lauren saying: "You signed up for the team, you support the team, you give it your all. Give it your best and that’s all that we ask of you."

As told to Sara Gaynes Levy