Bret Miller:  
Men have breasts, too!

Bret Miller was a junior in high school, on the football and wrestling teams, when he found a lump under his right nipple. During a sports physical, the 17-year-old mentioned the lump to the doctor, but was told it was ‘nothing to worry about.’

Seven years later, Bret had graduated from college and had been promoted to manager at the job he’d had since high school, at an exclusive country club near Kansas City, MO. Now with health insurance for the first time, he had a physical exam. A breast check was not part of the exam (male organs were checked, but not breasts) so Bret specifically asked the doctor to check the lump. The doctor did so, then ordered a sonogram, which led to a mammogram, and on April 27, 2010, the lump was removed. The next day, Bret’s cell phone rang, and he was told he had breast cancer. Bret had a mastectomy in May of 2010 followed by four rounds of chemotherapy. Bret stated, “People asked me, ‘are you worried about losing your hair?’ My reaction, Really?! I just lost a nipple; my hair will grow back.”

“Bret was the youngest on record anywhere,” says Peggy Miller, Bret’s mother, “so doctors weren’t sure how to make a treatment plan for him, and had to go all over the world for answers.” Bret’s cancer was 88% estrogen dependent; he was started on estrogen blocker Tamoxifen, but due to side effects was switched to Arimidex, which he took for five years. Mom Peggy has thirteen female cousins who have breast cancer. “None, including Bret, are positive for the (breast cancer) BRCA gene. The geneticist said we don’t know what it is, but there must be a gene somewhere. Maybe it is environmental? Someday we’ll have answers, maybe not in our lifetimes, though,” Peggy adds. “I thank the American Cancer Society—they were wonderful.” Breast cancer in one so young is rare: according to the Journal of the American Society of Radiologic Technologists (Jan. 2015), “the risk of breast cancer before 20 years of age is 1 in 15,000.”

Surgeon Dr. McCroskey, told Bret at the time, “You are my 13th male patient with breast cancer.” Bret promised the doctor that he would work to raise awareness in high schools and colleges about breast cancer, if the doctor would make him well. Likewise, his mother promised to help the effort, if God would heal her son. So on May 17, 2010, with the help of his parents and brother Blake, who built the website, Bret founded the Bret Miller IT Foundation to do just that. In 2014, Cheri Ambrose, who had a close male friend with breast cancer, joined the effort and together they formed the Male Breast Cancer Coalition. “My mission now is to spread the word to everyone, men and women, young and old, that breast cancer does not discriminate, it can happen to anyone, at any age, and to men, too!” Bret covered the cost of the website servers out of his own pocket, by working two jobs. The website includes videos, resources, links, and stories of males with breast cancer, including Bret’s. Bret has been cancer-free for seven years, and is a spokesman for the American Cancer Society’s ‘Real Men Wear Pink’ campaign, initially set up for caregivers; he successfully lobbied to have the campaign include male breast cancer survivors. Recently engaged, Bret plans to marry his fiancé Tasha one year from now. Bret’s advice: “Don’t ignore anything! You are your own best advocate for your body. Early detection is the first step in the fight against breast cancer!”

To read more about Bret’s mission, visit www.malebreastcancercoalition.org.