

Uplifting story to give hope

When Gold Coaster Veronica Neave and her sisters discovered they carried a gene putting them at a higher risk of breast cancer, huge decisions needed to be made. Now Veronica has written a book about this life-changing experience, reports **Michael Jacobson**

IT says much about Veronica Neave's sense of humour that, a year after undergoing a double mastectomy to prevent the breast cancer she may never have contracted, a page of her just-released autobiography is devoted to nicknames for breasts.

They're all present, from the familiar (boobs, hooters, knockers) and the not so (bojangles, fugis, gedoinkers) to the weird (wibbly-wobbly warheads, sago puddings, Golden Winnebagos) and the downright cruel (empty tea bags, Goondiwindi mail bags, saggies).

Gold Coaster Veronica's book, *Pieces of Me* (Big Sky Publishing, rrp \$24.99), is an unabashed account of womanhood, individual and family strength and, of course, breasts.

"Boobs are so lovely to have and to behold, it's true," says Veronica, speaking from Montreal where the feted actor, writer and director is performing in the play *The Age I'm In*. "Frankly, I wish they weren't so wonderful, then we wouldn't miss them so much."

Veronica certainly misses hers. She says her new, reconstructed

breasts still feel like imposters.

However, adapting to change is just one of the themes driving *Pieces of Me* in which Veronica and her family's breast cancer experience serves as a both a warning and an inspiration, both timely factors during October's Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

After Veronica tested positive in 2005 to the BRCA2 gene mutation that greatly increases the risk of breast cancer, similar findings for

her sisters Elisha and Chrissy encouraged notions of a family curse.

It was a reasonable view given Veronica's mother had developed breast cancer at 49, her aunt at 59 and her grandmother, great-grandmother and great aunt had all died young.

In Veronica's mind, breast cancer became a ques-

tion of not if, but when.

"It's strange. Until a few years ago, my family had never heard of the BRCA2 gene, and now it seems to be everywhere," she says.

"It's a bizarre predicament, dealing with the concept you may have cancer, but not yet, and to be making decisions on a future that may or may not happen, but could kill you.

"I was screaming out for some-

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one to tell me what to do. I was so confused and wondering just how much time I really had before fate took the decision out of my hands?"

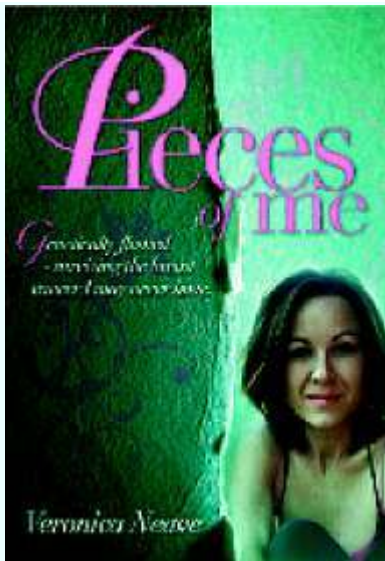
Sister Chrissy underwent her double mastectomy in 2007 – the family even had a 'farewell to her breasts' party – while Veronica had the surgery last August.

In *Pieces of Me*, Veronica recalls a night on the Gold Coast when the three sisters, each one dressed to show off their busts, asked a taxi driver: "The three of us are considering removing our healthy breasts because of a high likelihood of breast cancer in our family. Do you think, being male, that you would consider removing your healthy testicles to save your life?"

"Poor guy, he never had a chance," she writes. "But without a word of a lie he simply replied 'I'd rather get a Monaro'."

Such humour, enormous heart and the untiring support of family and friends have helped Veronica during her post-operative journey.

She calls herself a 'pre-vivor' and



Veronica's inspiring story is told in her new book

in stage productions such as *Breast Wishes* she has addressed the subject of breasts, breast cancer and their physical, emotional and psychological consequences.

"My femininity certainly is not defined by what is or isn't in my bra," says Veronica. "I just hope my experience offers a resource to others emotionally and practically."

"It's a very radical predicament to be in and disorientation prevails. I hope others can orientate themselves a little through my account."

"Sharing our burdens really does help us all feel less alone, right?"

So whatever you might call them – pinky and perky, fun bags, love pillows, sweater puppets, norks, Thelma and Louise or any of the many other options so gleefully included in *Pieces of Me* – the message is clear: there is more to a woman than her breasts.

As Veronica Neave exemplifies, femininity and womanhood transcend the physical to stand fully formed, proud, true and beautiful.



Elisha Neave, Chrissy Keepence and Veronica Neave share a problem – now Veronica hopes to help others

● Karyn Chapman Photography