

Life

INSPIRATION AND ADVICE



On top of her **game**

*One of our top
breast surgeons focuses
on what really matters.*
By Sally Farhat Kassab

A PATIENT WALKED INTO the office of Jane Mendez, M.D.; she thought she felt a mass in her breast. “I could immediately feel that at least half her breast was cancer,” Jane says sadly. “So I told her. She was silent, then told me she was pregnant with her fourth child.” The 43-year-old Chicana patient terminated the pregnancy, and is having chemotherapy to shrink the tumor. Soon, Jane will remove her breast. “The courage she had to make that decision, and her positive attitude, is what inspires me,” says Jane, a *puertorriqueña*.

Days like that—life-saving days—keep Jane going. As a 41-year-old attending breast surgeon and assistant professor of surgery at Boston Medical Center, she works 13-hour days, removing lumps, breasts and lymph nodes, teaching residents and medical students along the way. But her reach extends far beyond this hospital. Jane lectures doctors across the United States and Mexico, has written 15 papers and serves on committees of the American College of Surgeons Oncology Group and the American Society of Breast

PHOTOGRAPH: LEAH FASTEN; GROOMING: HEID WELLS FOR ENNIS.

Surgeons. She was featured in a hospital fund-raising film and was recently invited to the Boston University School of Medicine Emerging Leaders Forum. But she still makes time for her daily work at the hospital's Belkin Breast Health Center. "Telling women they have cancer is the most difficult part of my job," she says. "But I tell them there is hope, there are options and that they must keep their spirits up."

Sixty percent of her patients are Latinas; most of them don't speak English and don't have insurance. While she loves all of her patients, these are the women who have a special place in her heart—the ones who bring her tea when they return from Guatemala or cookies after a trip back to Mexico. These are breast-cancer survivors, many of them now without breasts but with bigger hearts and gentler souls. Jane speaks to them in their native tongue, cares for them as if they were family and supports them through some of the most difficult times of their lives.

That was her goal from the start. Back in her native San Juan, she knew she wanted to attend Harvard and help her people, the women she'd seen labeled by some doctors as ignorant or less worthy. "If they don't speak the language, some doctors pay less attention to them," Jane says. "They put them to the side—not everybody takes time to understand and communicate."

Jane also knew Latinas were less likely to get regular mammograms and perform breast self-exams, and she wanted to do something about it. She's treated countless women in the late stages of breast cancer. "This is something I see every day, and it could have been avoided," she says. "That's what propels me to continue, to prevent this from happening."

The long path—four years of college, four years of medical school, six years of surgery training, one more year of breast specialization and now the rigorous work schedule—has been the focus of her life. She has sacrificed many dinners with friends and time to nurture relationships, and she isn't married. "I'm a *jamona* to most people," she says frankly, using Puerto Rican slang for spinster. "But you have to make compromises. I do want to be married and have children, but I made choices that got me here today. I'm proud of who I am."

But she's most proud of her relationships with the women who come into her office. "I'm very protective of my patients," she says. "When I have to use the Latina temper, I will!" And she does just that when a patient needs to get a mammogram but the department's schedule is booked solid—she won't take no for an answer.

Her patients appreciate it. Jane performed a lumpectomy, and later a mastectomy, on now 59-year-old Olga Moreno-Hernandez, who says Jane was her support through it all. "I find Dr. Mendez to be a very spiritual person," Olga says. "She combines the arts and



Jane in June 2004, receiving her breast surgery fellowship diploma from Dr. Patrick Borgen at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City.

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sciences to become the doctor that she is. She captures the soul of a person in her treatment and never rushes you off."

Everyone who knows Jane speaks of her drive. It was never more evident than when she applied to medical schools. "I never dreamed I'd be accepted to Harvard, MIT and Tulane," she says. "But you are dealt the cards in life—it's up to you what to do with them."

One thing she did with those cards was pursue a mentorship with Arthur Aufses Jr., M.D., of Mount Sinai School of Medicine, whom she met in her third year of med school. She'd just given what Dr. Aufses calls one of the best presentations he's ever heard from a student. "What was outstanding was not only her knowledge about the patient she was presenting, but also her maturity," he explains, "and Jane turned out to be an excellent surgeon with fine technique and fine judgment." To this day, Jane credits Dr. Aufses with keeping her on track.

And it doesn't hurt that she talks to her parents in San Juan almost every day. Her sister, Laura, who's married to New York Yankees catcher Jorge Posada, and her brother, Manuel Mendez, a biomedical engineer in Belgium, are also part of her support system. And then there's Scott, her boyfriend of two years, who lives in Maryland. She surrounds herself with positive people who love her and has learned that, as she says, "those who don't give us positive energy shouldn't be in our personal space."

Her philosophy is working: Jane remains calm and smiling amid one of the most stressful jobs there is, and she continues to draw strength from her patients. "It's very draining work, but I wouldn't have it any other way," she says. "I'm not here for the glory or the fame. When I have someone say 'Thank you' to me, or I change someone's life, or I just listen to what they have to say because we speak the same language—that's what keeps me going." ■

Jane's advice to you

BE YOU. "It's so easy to fall into the mold the world wants you to; I am who I am, despite what I do."

NETWORK. "Be proactive. Opportunities are not going to land in your lap."

"DIFFERENT" EQUALS "VALUABLE." "People never guess I'm a surgeon. I have an accent, am Latina and am a woman. But I'm proud of it. I don't want to be like everyone else."
—S.F.K.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF JANE MENDEZ, M.D.