

A USER'S GUIDE FOR THE DOCUMENTARY FILM

# *How Can We Love You?*



*"This is an important film for women living with breast cancer as well as the people who care for and love them. It deals with the difficult issues related to living with a life-threatening illness, the meaning of life and hope, as well as death and dying. But it is first and foremost about relationships and caring for the people we love."*

— Jennifer Keck, breast cancer survivor and advocate

Prepared by Sky Works Charitable Foundation  
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*NOTE: This Guide was primarily designed for use by those organizing community screenings, but most of the material will be equally applicable to use in the classroom or in other appropriate settings.*

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# ***How Can We Love You?***

## ***Behind the scenes with the play Handle with Care?***

An acclaimed documentary by Laura Sky (60:00 Minutes)

*How Can We Love You?* is the documentary story of Mary Sue Douglas and Jan Livingston, two women with metastatic breast cancer who traveled across North America with a community theatre troupe performing the play *Handle with Care?* This innovative play dramatized findings from research studies involving women with metastatic breast cancer and the oncologists who treated them. (Metastatic cancer is cancer that has spread to other parts of the body; at this time it is not considered curable, but it *is* treatable.) The play's cast included women with breast cancer, researchers from the Toronto-Sunnybrook Regional Cancer Centre and actors from Act II Studio at Ryerson Polytechnic University.

Filmmaker Laura Sky takes us behind the scenes in this compelling documentary to explore the personal stories of Mary Sue and Jan as they perform their stage roles, deal with the treatment of their cancers and live their everyday lives. *How Can We Love You?* brings us face to face with the daily struggles and pleasures of these women. Mary Sue and Jan talk frankly about their own feelings of mortality— and about their joy and fulfillment in making a difference for other women in the same situation.

Jan Livingston, a single working mother who taught for 25 years at an Orillia community college, became very ill during the production of this film and she has since died. Jan was an educator and advocate for women with breast cancer. *How Can We Love You?* is dedicated to her memory. Mary Sue Douglas, an advocate for women with breast cancer lived with her husband Peter in Toronto and had three adult sons. She has also died since the completion of the documentary. Mary Sue described her feelings about reaching out to audiences: “I love it when people say – whether they have metastatic disease or something else, that our play made them feel not so alone – that it validated what they were feeling.”

*How Can We Love You?* speaks to the struggles and challenges faced by people with cancer, their family members and friends. It also celebrates the strengths that people draw upon in difficult times. The film highlights:

- Women with metastatic breast cancer talking with their children, partners, and friends about their illness; reflecting on how they cope; speaking frankly about their concerns and worries; telling us what they wish and hope for.
- Adult children responding to and living with their mother's diagnosis with advanced cancer, and supporting their mom through treatment.

- Encounters with health professionals and the experience of treatment.
- Friends talking about how they want to help, trying to understand how to be supportive.
- Women with metastatic disease as advocates, making a difference in their communities and in the lives of people facing illness.

*How Can We Love You?* makes us think about the issues faced by women with breast cancer. It also addresses the concerns of those who love and care for them: friends and family, cancer care professionals, and women's health advocates. Most importantly, this film gives an unprecedented voice and presence to women with metastatic breast cancer.

*How Can We Love You?* was generously funded by the Ontario Women's Health Council (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care), the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation— Ontario Chapter, the Breast Cancer Fund (U.S.) and more than 70 individuals, foundations and corporate sponsors.

**Producer and Director**  
**Director of Photography**  
**Editor:**  
**Sound:**  
**Original Music:**  
**Executive Producer:**

**Laura Sky**  
**Jim Aquila, CSC**  
**Hugo von Levetzow**  
**Ross Redfern**  
**Patrick Godfrey**  
**Pat Davidson**

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# Frequently Asked Questions about Metastatic Breast Cancer

## What is metastatic breast cancer?

Metastasis means “the spread of cancer”. Metastatic breast cancer is a cancer that occurs when cancer cells from the primary site of the breast (called “the primary cancer”) have spread to another site of the body through the bloodstream or lymph system.

## Does every woman who gets breast cancer eventually get metastatic breast cancer?

Most women who get breast cancer will not get metastatic breast cancer. The likelihood of breast cancer metastasizing to another part of the body depends on the nature of the primary cancer, and the treatment you had for the original cancer.

## Can a woman get metastatic breast cancer if she has not already had a primary cancer?

No, although sometimes more than one site is discovered if the primary cancer has gone undiagnosed and has had time to spread. When metastatic cancer is discovered, a clinician will know if it is metastatic by the nature of the cells found there. For example, if breast cancer cells are found on lung tissue, they will know this is metastatic breast cancer and not a primary diagnosis of lung cancer.

## Is it curable?

At this time, it is not considered curable, although it *is* treatable; some women live many years with the disease. Each case is unique. There are a number of treatment options available, and new cancer treatments are currently under study.

## If it is not curable, why go through treatment?

There are different reasons for choosing treatment even if the disease is not curable. One reason is that treatment can be effective in gaining months or years on one’s life, and can help manage symptoms to improve a woman’s quality of life while she has the disease. Another reason has to do with people’s need to feel that they are actively doing something in the face of what they are living with. If a woman has previously had a good experience with treatment and feels she had an improved quality of life as a result of it for the period of time she was cancer-free, she may also be

more inclined to seek out treatment a second time. Some view metastatic breast cancer as a chronic disease that can be controlled.

## **What options are available for people with metastatic breast cancer?**

Treatments include chemotherapy, radiation, hormone therapy and surgery, or a combination of these. Some biological therapies, such as vaccines, are in the experimental stages. The choices available to someone who chooses treatment depend on how aggressive (advanced) the cancer is, where it is located, the age and general state of health of the person, and how well she may have responded to treatment with her primary diagnosis.

Additional choices which may be considered are complimentary therapies or joining a support group. Research shows that people with metastatic disease who join support groups frequently experience an improved quality of life.

Another option is to do nothing, although most choose some form of treatment. Decisions about treatment should be made in close consultation with your physician.

## **If I have already had breast cancer, are there symptoms I should watch for?**

Anything unusual, or that persists for an protracted length of time, should be checked out. The most likely sites for metastasis of breast cancer are the lungs, liver, brain and bones.

## **Where can I go for more information?**

Fanlight Productions' website, in the "Web Resources" section, has a number of links to sites offering information about cancer, including metastatic cancer, and related health issues.

## PLANNING & ORGANIZING A SCREENING

# *How Can We Love You?*

### INTRODUCTION

This guide will help you to plan for a screening and discussion of *How Can We Love You?* a documentary film about women living with breast cancer and metastatic breast cancer. The film offers a window into the lives of Mary Sue Douglas and Jan Livingston as they deal with the care and treatment of their cancer, move through their everyday lives, and perform with a theatre troupe in a unique play about the disease. Excerpts from the play are interlaced with conversations among cast members, the two women, and their family and friends.

*How Can We Love You?* gives people permission to talk about difficult issues – cancer, fear, mortality, caring for ill people, hope, loving and being loved. Laughter rings throughout *How Can We Love You?* and the documentary evokes a wide range of feelings from sadness to relief. We strongly urge the organizers of a screening to view the film in advance. Watching the documentary will help you know how to publicize it in your community, and to identify specific groups to target for attendance. You will also be able to give people the information they need to decide about attending the screening.

You may be showing *How Can We Love You?* to audiences composed of a broad range of people – women living with metastatic breast cancer, or recently diagnosed, their families and friends, health professionals, people who know little about the disease and people dealing with other serious illnesses. Whoever they are, audiences appreciate the chance to talk about what they've seen, so be sure to allow time for this in your planning. Watching the film in advance will help you prepare for the questions and the discussion which follow the screening. It will no doubt touch and perhaps even transform many who view it, and possibly help to improve the quality of life for women living with breast cancer.

*“You shared your life. It feels like I’ve known you such a long time. It takes great courage to do that.”*

— a young woman with metastatic breast cancer  
to Mary Sue after watching the documentary

## ABOUT THE DOCUMENTARY

*How Can We Love You?* is a behind-the-scenes look at a community theatre troupe which traveled across North America performing the play *Handle with Care?* This innovative play dramatizes findings from research studies of women with metastatic breast cancer and oncologists, undertaken by researchers at Toronto-Sunnybrook Regional Cancer Centre. Although the findings were published in a journal for health professionals, the importance of the topic and the richness of the stories the researchers heard prompted them to search for new ways to communicate the information. They approached Vrenia Ivonoffski, artistic director of Act II Studio at Ryerson Polytechnic University, a theatre program for older adults, to solicit her involvement. The Ryerson program has a history of developing socially relevant drama and the troupe created to tackle this latest challenge was composed of women who live with metastatic breast cancer, researchers who conducted the original research, and actors from Act II Studio. The play they developed was workshopped for several months before it was taken to the public.

The documentary includes scenes from different performances of the play and focuses in particular on the lives of Mary Sue and Jan, neither of whom are professional actors. Mary Sue Douglas, an advocate for women with breast cancer, is shown with her husband, Peter, and her three adult sons. She describes her feelings about reaching out to audiences: “I love it when people say – whether they have metastatic disease or something else – that our play made them feel not so alone...that it validated what they were feeling.”

*[Mary Sue Douglas, the ‘diva’ of **How Can We Love You?**, died on March 31, 2002. She died in a way she had hoped to, peacefully, at home in her own bed, with her family by her side and aware of the love of her*

*many friends. Mary Sue lived with breast cancer for 14 years, and with metastatic breast cancer for seven and a half years. It was only in the last 12 days of her life that she became too ill to continue.]*

Jan Livingston raised her daughter Nadine as a single parent while she taught, for 25 years, at a community college in Orillia. She said of the play, “We’ve had a magical time of discussion, learning, honest talk about living and dying. But mostly it’s been a time of great laughter and love.” Jan became very ill during the filming of *How Do We Love You?* and died soon after the film’s completion. She was an advocate and educator for women with breast cancer, and the film is dedicated to her memory.

*"The film gave me permission to talk to my mother about things  
I hadn't been able to share with her."*

— a young viewer

The documentary was filmed over a period of nine months, while the original cast toured the play. At different occasions during the editing process, the film was pre-screened to a range of groups – women with breast cancer, people working with women with breast cancer – and their feedback was integrated into subsequent versions before it was completed.

The play, *Handle with Care?*, finished touring by the time the documentary was released. After touring with the original troupe of actors, the rights to the play were secured by a group in Alberta and it was performed in the Prairies with a new cast.

## **PLANNING FOR THE SCREENING**

Assume you have watched the documentary and now want to arrange a screening in your community. This section of the Guide offers some things to consider as you proceed.

First of all, be realistic about the time, energy, and resources of your planning team. A good screening for 40 people may be more rewarding than a stressful event for 400.

### **WHO WILL YOU SHOW IT TO?**

*How Can We Love You?* was designed to be used by and with cancer support organizations, women's health groups, community and institutional education programs, professional associations, hospitals, and cancer care agencies. It is also suitable for members of the general public who may have experienced cancer or other serious illness in their own lives or the lives of someone near to them. All of these are appropriate audiences. It's a matter of thinking about who you want to show it to.

### **DOING WHAT'S DOABLE**

What you achieve with your screening is entirely up to you, a reflection of the needs, opportunities, and resources that exist in your community. Whether the audience is twenty people or two hundred isn't what matters; the best plans don't overreach, but take advantage of the skills and capabilities of the planning group to do what is doable. The people you have, as well as their number, will determine not only how large an event you can organize but who in your community you can attract. The great advantage of working with other individuals and organizations is that you can share skills. For example, if publicity and advertising is not your strength, maybe it is something another individual or group enjoys and is good at doing. If you're not already involved with an organization (or institution or department) in planning this screening, consider approaching others to solicit their help, perhaps as co-hosts.

Try to reach out to communities who are sometimes overlooked in organizing events like this – minority and Native American communities,

immigrant communities, low income groups and seniors. By working with members from those groups, you will have a much greater chance of reaching their communities. Consider this as you prepare to publicize the event.

*“If I had seen this film when I was first nursing, I would have been a better nurse.”*

— an ICU nurse

## **WHERE WILL YOU HOLD IT?**

Think about your venue well in advance as some places require a long lead time for booking, especially in large urban centres. Availability of a room is often the key factor in determining when the event takes place.

Choose your venue according to the size of group you want to attend. If you promote the event widely and cannot determine in advance how large a crowd you will draw, be sure you have secured space big enough to handle a crowd. Public libraries, community centres, community colleges, universities, friendship centres, churches and other places of worship, and other public places usually have spaces suitable for screenings such as this. If you intend to show it to a small group, use a smaller more intimate environment, such as someone’s living room, a party room in an apartment building, a small meeting room in a public building, or a church basement.

## **PLAN FOR EASY ACCESS**

Venues with good access to public transportation and ample parking are always your best bet. Whatever environment you choose, find space that is accessible to people in wheelchairs or using other assistive devices. A location where someone with a wheelchair has to use a freight elevator or a rear entrance is not recommended. Make people using wheelchairs feel welcome by ease of entrance and participation through the entire period of the screening. If you can additionally offer amplification of the film for people with hearing difficulties, or sign language interpretation for the deaf, you will have made your event open to a whole other community of people.

# ORGANIZING THE SCREENING

## SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Be sure you have the technical equipment you need to show a videotape in the setting you have chosen. If the facility has a technical department, speak with the person there to ensure this is available, or arrange to have the equipment brought in from outside. We recommend video projection screens rather than televisions for any group larger than fifteen.

We strongly suggest that you check out the projection quality in advance; that is, to put the tape in the machine you will be using and make sure that both projection and sound are acceptable. Do this with your technician. And don't forget about the sound. It's too late to solve these problems once the screening has started!

- Give specific instructions to ensure the room is set up in a way that is suitable for viewing and ideally, for discussion afterwards. If you have any guest speakers attending the screening for the discussion afterwards, you may also want to have a table or comfortable chairs set up at the front of the room for them to sit at. If it is a large room, you will need microphones for this as well as for the audience members to be heard by everyone.
- This film elicits a lot of emotions in some people. Tears can be expected. Have a few boxes of Kleenex readily available at the screening (e.g. at a resource table, see below).
- In screenings we have held, we have found that, occasionally, someone will leave the screening or take a brief break. Because the film deals with some intense emotional issues, this may happen at your screening as well. If you would like to prepare for this eventuality, you could have someone skilled at support to stay in the lobby area while the film is screening, to be available if someone needs to talk.

## **AN INFORMATION/RESOURCE TABLE**

People attending a screening of a documentary such as this often want to take information away with them when the screening is over. A resource table set up in a prominent position is worth all the energy you can give it. The resource table often becomes the site of good conversation, and the informal exchange of ideas and information.

Have at least one person staff this table before, during and after the screening. If that person can be someone who is knowledgeable about breast cancer, all the better. If you live in a city that has a women's bookstore, you may want to invite them to set up a table and bring books on breast cancer and other women's health and supportive care issues, in addition to your own resource table. What you might include at the resource table:

- Handouts, flyers, brochures, etc. from your local breast cancer support groups, cancer support centers, palliative care centers, community care facilities, etc. Be sure this includes items with phone numbers and e-mail addresses on them. This may involve preparing in advance your own one-page list of key local resources.
- Your local breast cancer support group may have items to sell for fundraising. Arrange in advance to have these at the table if this seems appropriate.
- Ordering information for the documentary from Fanlight Productions.

## FACILITATING DISCUSSION

Well in advance of your screening, it helps to think about how to facilitate a discussion following the screening of *How Can We Love You?* Are you, or someone you plan to involve, comfortable facilitating discussions, especially when the topic is emotional in nature? Consider who would be best to do this and be sure that that person has viewed the film in advance.

We have arranged different kinds of events following the screening of the documentary. We know with certainty that it is best to offer the opportunity for people to speak after they have seen it, as opposed to simply closing with no discussion. How you organize and plan for such an opportunity is your choice.

*How Can We Love You?* was made with the hope that it would be helpful for women living with breast cancer, but we have found it to be helpful for people dealing with other illnesses and life issues as well. In a discussion following the screening, you may find you are presented with a range of questions and comments. In this section, we offer a few general tips and some more specific help.

*“It could take me four years to do what has been done at the screening this afternoon.”*

— an instructor of nursing students

### GENERAL TIPS

- People will need a few moments to collect themselves right after the film ends. No need to rush right into discussion, simply tell people you’re going to take a few minutes for people to settle and collect their thoughts and emotions. Silence is fine!
- Begin by introducing yourself, indicating why you or your organization have decided to show this documentary and what it means to you. If the group is small enough (10-20 people) and it is appropriate, it can be helpful to go around the room and have people there give their name and any affiliation they feel comfortable with.

Tell the group that you intend this to be an informal discussion (if that is what you plan) and that you may also be able to help in answering questions if they have any.

- If people are not forthcoming initially, you may want to lead with some general questions, such as: “What overall impression do you take away with you from this documentary?” “Which scenes tend to stay with you or do you tend to identify with?” “Were there scenes that made you think about your own experience?”
- There are no “correct” answers to most of what will be discussed (except, sometimes, where certain medical information is concerned); there is no test to pass. You simply need to be able to help others express feelings that the documentary may bring out. There may be questions you did not expect. Don't feel you have failed if you don't have answers or could not satisfy everyone. Sometimes the best policy is simply to let members of the audience work out an issue and come to their own understanding.
- If there are practical questions you can't answer (either medical in nature or perhaps about someone in the documentary, e.g. people sometimes want to know how so-and-so is doing since the film was made), it's fine to say you don't know. If the audience is such that you can provide answers later on (for example if they are all members of an organization) you can offer to check out the answer afterwards and get back to them. It also helps to encourage people to talk to medical providers and other regional support and information services to have their questions answered.
- Remember that your role should be one of facilitating, rather than giving advice. Often after viewing a documentary such as this, people simply need to say what they are feeling, and to be heard.
- Sometimes people's questions or comments will point to the need for a follow-up guest speaker or event on a particular topic. For example, a number of questions about how Jan was cared for at home may indicate an interest in having someone who works in palliative care come to speak to the group at a future date.

## SPECIFIC ISSUES THAT MAY ARISE

- Someone in the audience, possibly quite moved by the documentary or simply wanting an opportunity to be heard, may feel the need to tell her life story (or medical history) once given the floor. Don't panic. While you don't want this person to run away with the event, it is important to validate what she is saying. Avoid engaging in argument or debate but be sure to correct any misinformation that may be expressed (e.g. "I know the reason my cancer came back was because I just don't have a positive attitude toward life.") Whenever you can, try to link whatever point they are making back to the documentary and talk about some of the complex issues it raises. Acknowledge that the film raises a number of unresolved issues, but that these may present opportunities for discussion that were never there before.

*"I'm overwhelmed by this. It was a last-minute decision to drop in. I wish my family were here."*

— an audience member

- This film illustrates a lot of love and intimacy towards women who are unwell. This can be a trigger for some people ("I wasn't that way when I was looking after my mother when she was dying." Or "I'll never get that kind of affection from the people I know if I have a fatal disease.") We've found that it helps to remind people that the work of taking care of people with a serious illness can be very hard. We need to recognize that we are all somewhat imperfect at it and not be too hard on ourselves for that. Even those who have been doing it for a long time and who others may think of as exemplary, struggle with saying the right thing, knowing when to intervene or when to just listen. It helps to acknowledge that in the caregiver role, there is sometimes a discrepancy between what we feel and what we do, and we can feel tremendous guilt for that. You can draw attention to the scene in the documentary with the four women outside on beach chairs, and note that even people who have been studying this issue and performing it before audiences can sometimes not know what to say or do. You may not be able to answer people's questions around

this, if indeed there are any answers, but try to simply re-state how we all, in our own way, struggle with that question in the title of the film – how can we love you?

- Similarly, if there are women in the audience who are living with either breast cancer or metastatic breast cancer, keep in mind that watching this documentary may take them from what has been largely a private struggle to one which is now part of a collective experience. This can be quite an intense experience and they may not feel ready to talk just yet. Be sensitive to this in the follow-up. The names of support groups and individual counsellors in your area (including clergy, palliative care personnel, bereavement counsellors) who may be able to help process their experience afterwards are very helpful to have available.
- Both the film *How Can We Love You?*, and the play, *Handle with Care?* challenge the rules and the structure that govern doctor-patient relationships. They both question pre-conceived notions of how patients, particularly women, often feel they are supposed to act. The film also gives a voice to the health care providers who often feel caught in a world where their deepest emotions must be suppressed so as not to cloud their judgment. These are provocative issues that may stimulate strong response from patients and caregivers in the audience. It is important to encourage expression and dialogue around these issues since there are often few avenues for voicing concerns. But it's also important not to have to referee an argument on these issues. Draw the most constructive points out from the group; then move on.

## **COFFEE AND CONVERSATION**

Have coffee, teas and cookies ready after the formal discussion. This gets people out of their seats and able to connect with each other on a more relaxed basis. Some members of your audience will be unable to express their feelings in front of a large, assembled group, and informal conversation in a more relaxed atmosphere will be helpful for them.

## **DELAYED RESPONSE**

We noted earlier that for people viewing this film for the first time, a clear response may not come until later. In particular, women recently diagnosed with breast cancer or metastatic breast cancer may find themselves struggling to process all that they have seen and heard. As a facilitator, you may suggest to an audience that it is understandable if thoughts or feelings should arise in the days ahead. Encourage connections with community support people for de-briefing.

And... **listserv!** Many members of your audience will have access to the web from their home computers. The film's producer, Laura Sky, has set up an email listserv that functions as a chat room for *How Can We Love You?* The listserv is free, it's confidential, and though anyone can listen in, no one has to say anything unless they're ready to say it. We have found that audience members and local hosts often have thoughts and feelings about the documentary that they want to share. This listserv will allow for a two-way communication between all list members and will be used to share information, questions, comments, tips and news. If you wish to become a member of the list (it is free), please email Nathalie Lévesque at [info@laurasky.org](mailto:info@laurasky.org)

## OTHER USES FOR THE DOCUMENTARY

Having viewed the documentary, you may see other uses for it. The film can be shown in its entirety or in sections, depending on your intention.

Possibilities include:

- Showing the film to a group of women who support other women with breast cancer and creating a workshop to enhance their skills in responding to the needs of women with metastatic breast disease.
- A group of hospice workers might use the documentary in a focused setting to explore the strains, contradictions and rewards of their work.
- Showing the documentary to palliative care workers with a focus on issues faced by families dealing with a family member who has advanced disease. The film can help draw out some of the tougher issues.
- A group of adult children from families who are living with breast cancer may benefit from their own screening. It may also be valuable to screen the documentary for a group of adult children and their parents.

### IN SUMMARY

The discovery of breast cancer can be devastating; of metastatic breast cancer doubly so. Women living through this, and the people caring for those women, need a tremendous amount of support. By taking that experience from the private and personal realm to a more public expression, *How Can We Love You?* becomes a powerful support tool for people in your community dealing with these issues. It shows that there are ways by which the burden can be shared, by offering people the space in which to air their fears, their vulnerability, and their hope. Simply to hear one's experience echoed by those women on the screen can be deeply affirming.

*"As a woman living with breast cancer I think it is important that we not shy away from the difficult issues associated with illness, health, death and dying. How Can We Love You? challenges us to begin that discussion in a meaningful and compassionate way. This is a film about life and hope."*

- Jennifer Keck

## How Can We Love You?

Jennifer Keck, September 2002

Laura Sky's new film on metastatic breast cancer, *How Can We Love You?* has special meaning for me. Last winter I was diagnosed with breast cancer for the second time. My first experience with breast cancer was in the spring of 1997 when I found a lump in my right breast. I went through surgery, chemotherapy and radiation and was off work for most of the next school year.

It was a shock to find out that the cancer had returned last February. Tests, doctors and treatment. Again. More turbans and hats. This time I also had to deal with the fact that I have what is called metastatic disease or advanced breast cancer. The term means that the cancer has spread to another part of my body, beyond my breast.

All of the fears were back. It helped to know other women with this disease through the breast cancer support group, but I was desperate for more information. Except that this time there were almost no resources dealing with what happens when breast cancer returns. The self-help titles at the local bookstores stressed early detection, prevention and how to 'conquer' breast cancer.

Important messages, but what happens when cancer returns? There were less than 15 pages dedicated to this possibility. Did the fact that no one

was writing- or speaking- about advanced breast cancer mean there was no hope in my case? What is hope in my case?

Through some strange set of coincidences I was asked to review *How Can We Love You?* in the middle of this. The film is a documentary about a community theatre group touring with an innovative play about women's experiences with metastatic breast cancer. The play, *Handle with Care*, was based on findings from research studies of women with breast cancer and their oncologists. Cast members included women with breast cancer, researchers from Sunnybrook Hospital and actors from Act II Studio at Ryerson Polytechnic University. The play toured parts of Canada and the United States and was in Sudbury in January 1998.

I first met the film-maker, Laura Sky, when she was shooting scenes for *How Can I Love You?* at Sudbury's cancer treatment center. Stuart Cryer, a friend and local videographer, was filming for Sky and I begged him for an introduction. I was a long-time fan of Sky's work. Her award-winning documentaries are known for their portrayal of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. I also knew of the work of Jan Livingston, one of the women featured in the film and a long-time advocate in the breast cancer support community.

After meeting with Sky I became a committed supporter of the *How Can We Love You?* project. I was fascinated with the prospect of a film that would document the voices of women who were dealing with cancer that had returned- a group that is all but invisible in breast cancer awareness and education. I also liked Sky. She was easy-going, accessible and clearly cared about the issues and the women involved with the project.

Flash forward to last April. The film is ready for distribution but I am now dealing with my own reaction to another diagnosis of breast cancer. Do I want to watch a film that talks about other women's experiences with this

disease? A film that is bound to trigger difficult emotions? Could I listen to other women confront their mortality (and mine)? While initially cautious, I agreed to watch the film with friends from the breast cancer support group.

I am so glad that I decided to watch the film. After months of trying to find resources on metastatic breast cancer, here was a film about my life. On screen. Here were women living- and struggling- with advanced breast cancer. Dealing with diagnosis. Making decisions about treatment. Living life to the fullest while confronting their own mortality. And here was a filmmaker who was not afraid to say metastatic disease. Out loud.

The film brings us into the lives of Jan Livingston and Mary Sue Douglas, two women living with breast cancer, as they perform with the play in Edmonton and Florida. We are invited to explore their trials with the disease as well as the tremendous strength they gain from the support of their family and friends. They love being actresses through this part of their life. Mary Sue Douglas celebrates this point in the promotional flyer for the film: “I’m a star! I know it and I love it.”

Jan Livingston fell ill and had to undergo treatments during the production of the film. She died before it was finished. It means a great deal to me that she thought the messages in this film were important enough to continue despite her failing health. Her voice, and that of Mary Sue Douglas, make this film.

This is an important film for women living with breast cancer as well as the people who care for and love them. It deals with difficult issues related to living with a life-threatening illness- the meaning of life and hope as well as death and dying. But it is first and foremost about relationships and caring for the people we love.

*How Can We Love You?* helps us understand the diversity of experience with breast cancer by making visible the experience of women with advanced disease. It's a tough film at times. But one that we can all benefit from viewing. Together. Hope to see you there.