Bria Rowse, who decided to shave her head after her very first chemo treatment, recalls a man telling her she looked like G.I. Jane. “I was like, ‘Well, hot darn! I don’t, but I appreciate you saying that.’”

Spend any time with Bria and it quickly becomes clear that her likeness to G.I. Jane goes far beyond a buzzed head. She’s as tough as nails; or more exacting, she’s tougher than cancer.

In December 2021, Bria couldn’t ignore the pain on her right breast near her armpit. When she touched it, she felt a lump. “It was pretty pronounced, and it was on the surface,” she recalls. At 39, Bria had only had a mammogram once before when she discovered a painful lump. It was biopsied and turned out to be a cyst. She also knew that cancerous tumors often weren’t painful, so she didn’t panic, but she did act.

Bria’s primary care doctor referred her for a mammogram, which led to another biopsy. A few days later, at the Chatham County Board of Assessors where she works, Bria received a call from her primary care physician’s office, following up to see if she had made her appointment with her breast oncologist, under the impression that Bria had already received her results. “No, but I guess that gives me my answer,” she recalls saying. Bria broke into tears. She called her husband, her best friend who is also a cancer survivor, and when she got home, she pulled herself together and told her 13-year-old daughter, Payton, who already knew her mom was awaiting the results from the biopsy. “I don’t shield her from much,” Bria admits. “The world is what it is and you have to learn to deal with things.”

Payton took the news in stride, perhaps because Bria put on a brave face. But she didn’t just put on a brave face; turns out Bria was up for the fight. “We don’t know the strength we have until we need it,” she says.

A few days later, Dr. Charles Usher gave Bria her diagnosis: triple negative breast cancer, stage IIB – the most aggressive and fastest growing form. Her tumor had quickly grown to more than 4 centimeters. “They told me that I should’ve started chemo yesterday,” she says. This form of cancer required rounds of heavy-duty chemotherapy to shrink the tumor before surgery. Bria got to work, and stayed at work. In fact, during her 20 weeks of chemotherapy, she never missed a single day, though she did work remotely during the worst of her treatment. “I kept busy with work rather than sitting there feeling miserable for myself,” she says. “It helped just to push through.” And push she did. Bria admits to breaking down in private every now and then – “I had to tell myself it’s okay, I’m allowed to cry” – but was comforted by the aggressive approach her oncologist, Dr. Mark Taylor, and Dr. Usher took and the fact that she could see the tumor shrinking even after her first treatment. Bria embraced her shaved head (even preferring it), elected to have a double mastectomy over a lumpectomy for peace of mind, and never doubted for a second that she wouldn’t beat cancer.

Bria rang the bell at the Lewis Cancer & Research Pavilion on July 5, marking the successful end of her treatment. But even when recalling what is often one of the most significant moments in the journey, Bria is deeply thankful yet characteristically stoic. In fact, the only time she reveals a tiny crack in her tough exterior is when she talks about the incredible nurses at the Lewis Cancer & Research Pavilion and how their spirits always lifted hers, and when she recalls seeing others ring the bell. Bria’s voice cracks, she takes a long pause to gather herself and then pushes forward. She switches gears and talks about a song she heard the other day that she connected with. “There was a line that said, ‘Superman’s got nothing on me,’” Bria says. Hearing her story, it’s clear why.
When Rochelle Jiminez felt a painful lump in her right breast in the fall of 2020, she tried to ignore it. She hadn’t seen a doctor in more than 20 years because she didn’t have medical insurance, and the pandemic was running rampant. The shooting pains came and went over 7 months, then, in July, they became constant.

Her sister, who lives with Rochelle, finally convinced her to go to urgent care. There, the physician felt the lump and instructed her to go straight to the Candler Hospital Emergency Department for a diagnostic ultrasound.

“In my heart, I had a feeling it was cancer,” Rochelle recalls. Breast cancer ran in her family. She was in the fifth grade when her mother was diagnosed and underwent chemotherapy and a mastectomy.

All the same, Rochelle was frustrated because the urgent care gave her bad information: the Candler Hospital ED doesn’t typically perform diagnostic ultrasounds. (The normal process for breast issues is to be seen by a specialty center with a mammogram first, then move on to an ultrasound based on the findings of a radiologist.) It might’ve all ended there, with Rochelle throwing her hands in the air and going home, but the Candler Hospital ED co-workers put her in touch with the St. Joseph’s/Candler’s Good Samaritan clinic, a free health clinic, and Dr. Charles Usher, a surgeon at Telfair Breast Surgery.

“The shooting pains came and went for 7 months,” Rochelle recalls. “When I go to work, I don’t think about the cancer, and neither did she,” says Rochelle. Throughout it all, she has kept her sense of humor. She even laughs as she remembers how she got fed up with her hair falling out and took clippers herself, her formerly long locks couldn’t reach the back. Rochelle revealed her botched buzz to her sister, and they both started laughing hysterically.

“My sister said, ‘What the hell did you do?!’” To which Rochelle replied, “I know, right? I look like Lars [“Stich”] from ‘The Goonies’!”

Throughout October, Paint The Town Pink initiatives will continue to raise awareness about this deadly form of cancer. The effort is a partnership between St. Joseph’s/Candler and the Savannah Morning News. Throughout October, Paint The Town Pink initiatives will continue to raise awareness about this deadly form of cancer. Early prevention is key to surviving breast cancer. St. Joseph’s/Candler recommends annual mammograms for women over the age of 40.

Mammography has been proven to save lives by catching breast cancer early. To schedule a 3D mammogram, call 912-819-PINK.
In January 2022, Jill Chatterson, 55, left her small hometown in Indiana to come to Savannah, looking for a fresh start. She had lost her fiancé to heart failure the previous year, and both of her daughters were in graduate school, starting to build lives of their own. She enrolled as a traveling registered nurse, and Georgia’s First City would also be her first assignment.

“I wanted to come to Savannah because of the beautiful ocean and sunshine,” Jill says. “I’d never done anything like this, but I decided I’d just be brave and drive down here.”

Three months later – away from her family and at a new job in a city she’d never been before – Jill was diagnosed with left multifocal invasive ductal carcinoma, stage IIA.

“Three months later – away from my family and at a new job in a city I’d never been before – Jill was diagnosed with left multifocal invasive ductal carcinoma, stage IIA.

“I thought, Wow, how much more do I have to face?”

But Jill is the kind of person who never has to tell her children.

“From that very first moment, I felt at home,” Jill says. “I knew in my heart that this is where I had to be, and this was where I was going to get my care.”

Jill underwent a bilateral mastectomy on April 6 and her mother – whom she also calls her best friend – came from Indiana to stay with her during recovery and subsequent chemotherapy treatments.

Upon Jill’s diagnosis, her mom wanted her to come home for treatment, but once she met the team, she completely understood why Jill opted to stay.

“She loved them, too,” Jill says.

When asked about her chemotherapy treatments at the Nancy N. and J.C. Lewis Cancer & Research Pavilion at St. Joseph’s/Candler, Jill gives an unexpected answer.

“It was a wonderful experience,” she says. “No matter what was going on in their life, they seemed to focus on me and what I was going through.”

Under the care of Dr. Mark Taylor, an oncologist at the Lewis Cancer & Research Pavilion, Jill would complete four sessions of chemo over the course of 12 weeks. She brought a bag of books to keep her entertained during the sessions but never cracked a smile. Not once. She was too busy chatting it up with the nurses and other patients.

A nurse herself, Jill understands how stressful the job can be. “But they had nothing but kindness on their face,” she says. “No matter what was going on in their life, they seemed to focus on me and what I was going through.”

There were, of course, difficult times. The chemo made Jill nauseous and exhausted. And as someone who always tended to her appearance, she struggled with the changes she was experiencing.

“One day, I looked in the mirror, and what I saw was cancer – and your chest is not there anymore – and then you look at your shaved head and the excess weight, I’d wonder, Who is this person I’m looking at?”

These few times Jill broke down, her mom would lift her up.

“If I needed to cry, she would just say a prayer and hug me.”

She admits that the hardest part of this experience was having to tell her daughters she had cancer.

“It’s something no parent should ever have to tell their children.”

But Jill is the kind of person who finds the silver lining 98 percent of the time.

“I’ve been really positive, and it’s because of my support,” she says.

“I love my treatment team; my mom and my family are wonderful. I have God … I have nothing but support.”

And during her treatment, both of her daughters got engaged.

“That was the best news in the world to me, because my girls are my life, and I want them to be happy no matter what.”

Today, Jill has returned fulltime to Coastal Harbor Treatment Center, where she works with kids ages 6 -18 to improve their mental and behavioral health.

She’s undergoing radiation treatments and will transition to taking an oral chemotherapy drug for 2-5 years. She’s tired from nightshiftings and treatments, but she’s as optimistic as ever, thanks in large part to her newfound Savannah family.

“Yes, I’ve been afraid, but at the same time I am at peace because of the way everything has fallen into place so wonderfully with my team and their staff,” says Jill.