



Show of Support

Rising star Ksenia Daniela Kharlamova teams up with Rethink Breast Cancer to raise breast health awareness

Photography by Katherine Holland

The *Heated Rivalry* fandom is feverish with anticipation. Season Two of the smash-hit hockey romance has started filming, and Toronto is abuzz with celeb sightings. Ksenia Daniela Kharlamova will soon reprise her breakout role as Svetlana, Ilya's beguiling, ever-supportive best friend, but on this day, she's taking a moment to champion a cause close to her own heart. In a bright, airy loft-style studio one summer morning, she slips on a crisp white Joe Fresh tee emblazoned with a pink graphic motif and a mission statement: educate, empower, advocate.

As Rethink Breast Cancer marks its milestone 25th birthday, the Toronto-raised actor and model is bringing her star power to the Canadian charity's focus: encouraging younger women to take charge of their breast health, and supporting those affected by breast cancer.

"A lot of younger people think they're invincible, but you never really know what can happen. And if you don't know the symptoms and signs, you might miss

something," says Kharlamova. Breast cancer has touched the lives of more than one person in her own tight-knit circle. "Someone close to me had it really, really young, and thank God they caught it early," she explains. "It was eye-opening. It inspired me even more to do this and hopefully get everyone's attention."

For Kharlamova, who grew up in a health-conscious family, taking care of herself involves getting outside whenever possible, making time to read and work out, and being comfortable in her own body. She's passionate about urging others to be breast-aware, which includes touching your breasts, understanding what's normal for you and looking out for changes. If anything seems "off," it's time to speak with your doctor.

"Younger women have to be familiar with their bodies to know something's wrong in the first place. If you don't know your baseline, it can be hard to catch something," says Kharlamova. "Being comfortable just looking in the mirror can help. It's important to check up on yourself."

HERE FOR THE UPS, DOWNS, AND WTF DO I DO NOWS.



rethink
BREAST CANCER

**CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF BREAST CANCER EDUCATION,
SUPPORT AND ADVOCACY FOR YOUNG WOMEN.**

EDUCATION

Rethink makes complex health topics easier to understand and gives younger women trusted information and resources tailored to their unique life stage, from fertility, body image and sexual health to motherhood, career, life after cancer and more.

SUPPORT

Rethink provides accessible, tailored support that helps younger women navigate the different stages of their breast cancer experience through virtual support groups with healthcare professionals and peers, as well as in-person community hangouts across Canada.

ADVOCACY

Rethink advocates for positive change in breast cancer care and the future of the healthcare system, tackling the big challenges others won't, like improving cancer data collection and expanding access to breakthrough treatments.

[RETHINKBREASTCANCER.COM/25](https://rethinkbreastcancer.com/25)

Meet the movement

Rethink Breast Cancer marks
25 years of leading change

Today, Rethink Breast Cancer is well established as a bold Canadian charity, connected with a global community of more than 80,000 people. But 25 years ago, it was just an idea: a dream of building up resources and advocacy for younger women facing a breast cancer diagnosis.

It all started in 2001 with an event in downtown Toronto. MJ DeCoteau, Rethink's founder and executive director, whose mother had died of breast cancer, wanted to boost young people's understanding of breast health and get them involved in raising funds for research. Breast cancer can affect people of any age, but historically younger women have been overlooked in education, care and support.

Rethink's awareness-raising collaborations with magazines, retailers and clothing brands soon caught attention. It also became clear that Rethink's mandate would need to expand and include support and community. "Very quickly, young women with breast cancer started reaching out," says DeCoteau. "They saw an organization doing things that seemed more youthful and reliable and felt like, *okay, maybe they will get it and get me.*"

The charity's fundraising efforts have been hugely impactful, in no small part thanks to an emphasis on fun and innovation. Rethink brought the Fashion Targets Breast Cancer campaign, with its iconic white T-shirt, to Canada and raised \$1.9 million over 10 years. Rethink's

flagship party, Boobyball, has also raised more than \$5.2 million since its inception and, following a hiatus, will return this October.

Rethink's education and advocacy have redefined what breast cancer care looks like for younger women, who are now more likely to get targeted care and advice that recognizes their life stage, including information on fertility preservation, sexual health and talking to their kids. "We've made progress," DeCoteau says. "I think we were really instrumental in showing that breast cancer is not just this one thing that people assume it is."

Moving forward, Rethink aims to continue offering younger women with breast cancer the tailored support, evidence-based information and understanding network they need to help navigate this whirlwind life change, whether they're newly diagnosed or part of the growing group of survivors and thrivers. The charity will also be a trusted resource for anyone looking to take charge of their breast health.

"We want to be that go-to resource but also a source of hope and inspiration," DeCoteau says. "And we're a place where you can get involved and give back and collaborate and help make it better for the next generation."



MJ DeCoteau, Rethink Breast Cancer founder and executive director

"We want to be that go-to resource but also a source of hope and inspiration"

What we know about breast cancer

Here's what current research can tell us.

- ➔ Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in Canada.
- ➔ 1 in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer over the course of their lifetime.
- ➔ About 5 percent of breast cancer cases are diagnosed in women under 40.
- ➔ Women under 40 are more likely to be diagnosed with more aggressive subtypes of breast cancer (like triple-negative or HER2-positive).
- ➔ Timely diagnosis matters. Early-stage breast cancer has high five-year net survival rates — for example, 100 percent for stage 1 breast cancer.
- ➔ Thanks to treatment innovations, some people with metastatic breast cancer (incurable but treatable) are living longer. But this makes tailored support crucial.
- ➔ Younger women with breast cancer have complex needs, yet they continue to experience gaps in care. Rethink Breast Cancer exists to change that.

These findings give us an idea, but Rethink Breast Cancer is advocating for complete data that tells us more about who is being diagnosed with breast cancer.

Rethink's top breast health tips

You're never too young to be proactive about your breast health, which includes being informed and knowing your normal. **You are your own best breast health advocate.**

Be breast aware with TLC:

TOUCH your breasts and get to know them.

LOOK for any changes to how they usually appear or feel.

CHECK with your doctor and make sure your concerns are heard.

Understand your unique risk.

Learn how your family history, genetic factors and lifestyle play a role. For example, mutations in genes (ex: BRCA) have been linked to increased breast cancer risk.

Reduce your risk. Maintain healthy habits, including getting regular exercise, reducing alcohol consumption and avoiding exposure to harmful chemicals in your environment.

Trust your instincts. Consult with a healthcare professional if things seem "off."

Speak up. Ask questions and seek second (or third) opinions.



Robby @robby.spring

“Talking about these things and sharing experiences helps you feel less alone”

Robby on dating after cancer treatment

“My life blew up three years ago,” Robby says. It was May 2023, and she was in what seemed to be a serious relationship of eight months when she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of HER2-negative breast cancer.

“It’s hard when you’re in a fresh relationship and are diagnosed with breast cancer,” says Robby, who was 35 at the time. “I gave him an out at the beginning. He said he wanted to be there.”

But two months later, when Robby was grappling with having a double mastectomy, freezing her eggs and facing what wound up being four rounds of chemotherapy, her boyfriend decided he didn’t want to be there after all. “Neither of us could have known how much my life was about to change. I wanted someone to acknowledge my experience and hold my hand. Ultimately, he wasn’t able to do that.”

Cancer alters you and your life circumstances so rapidly, Robby says, and not every partner is going to adapt to that with you. “Now, years later, I’m grateful because that’s not the partner I want. But going through the breakup while going through cancer, which is an isolating, heartbreaking, scary, lonely thing, was awful.”

Robby completed her chemo two-and-a-half years ago and is still in chemical-induced menopause, navigating sleep issues and weight gain, pain and fatigue. She has struggled with dating post-cancer. “I dove into dating way too fast, first going out with a wig, then with my short hair, which I hated. I hated how I looked. I didn’t feel like myself.” Therapy helped, and Robby decided to put a pause on dating. “I just worked on how to feel like a version of myself that I was happy with, which is somewhere between ‘old Robby’ and a new version of Robby, merging together.”

She has also been sharing about her experience online, connecting with other women navigating similar aspects of life after cancer: hair regrowth, relationships and body image. “Talking about these things and sharing experiences helps you feel less alone.” She gets a lot of DMs from women thanking her for posting about these topics.

“Being able to build a life I didn’t want to escape from helped me become confident and happy with where I was at,” Robby says. “And that took a lot of work. But in the end, that’s what helped me date again and meet someone wonderful.”

Real talk about breast cancer

Making space for women in the community to share their stories is one of Rethink’s biggest priorities. Here, four women tell us what it’s like to navigate the unique challenges of having breast cancer while young and in the thick of building their lives

Tarot on preserving her fertility

In 2021, Tarot was 29 and had just moved into a new home in L.A. She was about to start a family. “I’d wanted kids for a while,” Tarot says. “So everything was kind of aligning. It was one of the most peaceful times in my life.” Then came a diagnosis of grade three invasive ductal carcinoma, which changed all those plans. She had to uproot her life and move home to Toronto for treatment.

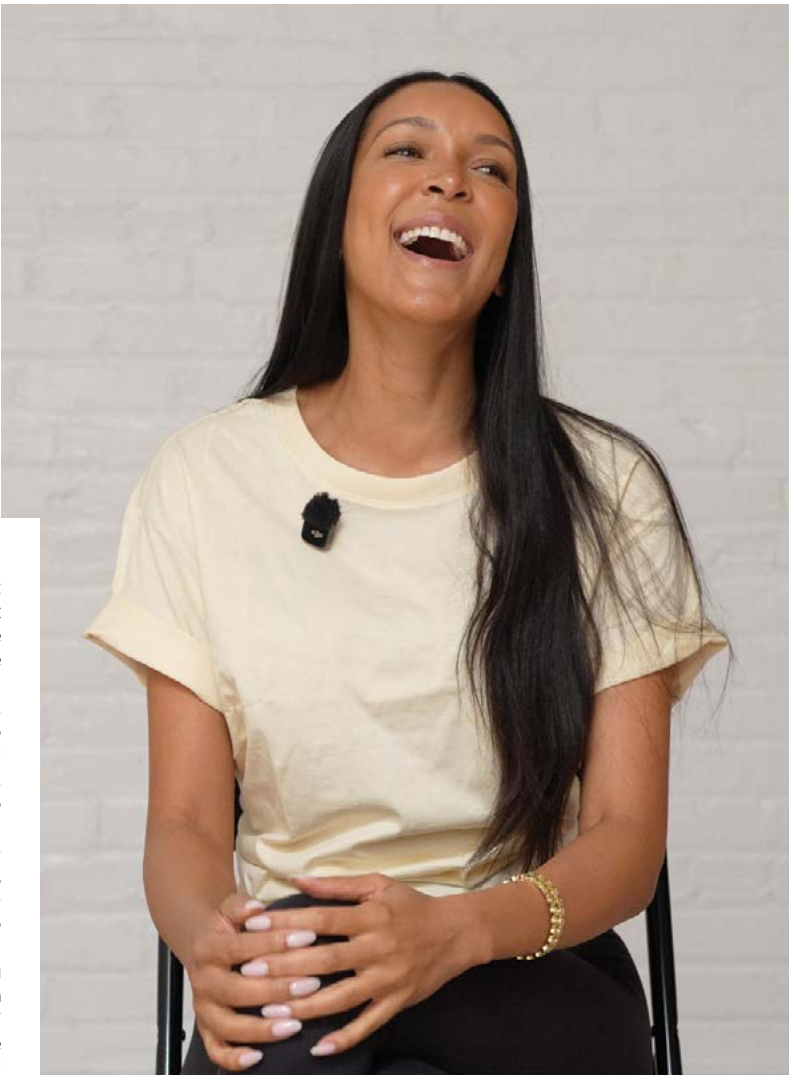
Tarot’s breast cancer was discovered after she noticed her nipple became irritated. She originally didn’t know it could be a sign of breast cancer, but when it didn’t go away on its own, she got it checked out. Before starting chemotherapy, which could damage her ovaries, her doctor suggested she consider options to preserve her fertility. “It has always been my dream to be a mother, so I immediately said, ‘Yes, I’m going to do whatever it takes.’”

After two weeks of self-administered hormone injections, Tarot underwent an egg-retrieval process. But she needed to get through her cancer treatment—chemotherapy, hormones to induce early menopause to protect her ovaries, mastectomy, reconstruction—and wait several years until she was cleared by her oncologist before trying to have children.

It was a five-year setback, with no guarantees of success. “I was planning on being in a different place in my life at that point,” she says. “But just knowing I had the option to freeze my eggs, so I had the possibility of pregnancy in the future, was comforting.”

Tarot is now in her final year of remission, typically marking a five-year milestone post-active cancer treatment. She has channelled her energy into fundraising and advocacy, even climbing Mount Kilimanjaro to raise awareness around breast cancer and preparing for a 202-kilometre solo kayak expedition this fall. “My breast cancer experience taught me that I am a lot stronger than I once thought I was.”

There are still many unknowns, including whether she will be able to get pregnant, but she’s taking things day by day. “There’s always the fear that it might not work out the way I want, but I’m just enjoying living life to the fullest and getting excited for this next chapter of being out of remission and, hopefully, getting back to my plans for a future family.”



Tarot @tarot_travels

“My breast cancer experience taught me that I am a lot stronger than I once thought I was”

Rethink’s 10 Care Priorities

As a younger woman with breast cancer, you should...

- | | | | | |
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| 1
Receive treatment and care tailored to you | 2
Be asked about breast cancer in your family | 3
Be informed about potential changes to your sexual and mental health | 4
Be informed about effects on your fertility and receive special care if you're pregnant or a new mom | 5
Be offered resources for your children and family |
| 6
Be offered professional support, such as talking to a counsellor or therapist | 7
Be informed about your options for breast reconstruction | 8
Be offered resources for financial support | 9
Be offered specialized supportive care services with a metastatic breast cancer diagnosis | 10
Know you're not alone |

FOR MORE ON THESE CARE PRIORITIES, VISIT RETHINKBREASTCANCER.COM/CAREPRIORITIES

“One of the hardest things was realizing I couldn’t just power through it. I had to slow down and ask for the support I needed”

Aya on how cancer affected her career

When Aya was diagnosed with stage 2B, ER-positive, HER2-negative invasive ductal carcinoma at age 39, she realized she needed to get a full-time job. “At one of my earliest appointments, they asked, ‘Do you have health benefits?’” she recalls. “That was pretty telling in terms of how crucial they were.”

Aya did not have health benefits. She was newly single, no longer covered under her former partner’s insurance plan, and running her own freelance editing and content marketing business. “At the moment of diagnosis, your career is on this trajectory. You think you know where you’re headed, and then it completely derails everything you had planned.”

She wasn’t able to work during breast cancer treatment. “The emotional weight of it all, on top of the side effects that came with treatment, was all-consuming,” Aya says. She got by financially during that stretch and vowed to find full-time work with an employer as soon as treatment was done.

After her treatment, she felt she’d missed out on many months of productivity and income. “It naturally puts you at a disadvantage when it comes to your career and you’re playing a lot of catch-up, which can be incredibly frightening as a single woman.”

When Aya did land a new role, she struggled with ongoing fatigue and brain fog and worried about disappointing her new manager. “I felt like I’d been incredibly sharp prior to cancer, but now I’d lost my sparkle. My confidence took a major hit.”

At the time, Aya worried about sharing too much, but looking back, she wishes she’d been more open with her colleagues and manager about what she was going through. “One of the hardest things was realizing I couldn’t just power through it. I had to slow down and ask for the support I needed. I think people do genuinely want to help, but they may not know how, and you may have to educate them on what you need.”

Now, at 48, Aya is almost 10 years out from treatment and remains cancer-free. She owns her own place, earns a steady salary and has found her footing in her career again. “I’m not who I was before diagnosis, professionally or otherwise, and I’ve made peace with that. I like where I’ve landed.”



Aya @ayamcmillan

“I’m free now to focus on what I want my life to look like, for whatever time I have left”

Margaret on becoming a mother with metastatic breast cancer

Margaret was 40 years old—and five weeks pregnant—when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. “It was a very lonely time,” she says, “just me and my husband dealing with this. You want to share that you’re going to have a baby, but you don’t want to share that it’s under these scary circumstances.”

Things happened fast, and a team formed around her: surgeons, social workers, specialty OBGYNs, medical oncologists and experts in palliative care. “It was a tumultuous time, with a lot of information coming at me,” says Margaret, who felt both supported and isolated. There was hope, but also a lot of fear and uncertainty.

And then right before her first dose of chemotherapy, Margaret was given the devastating news that the cancer had spread to her ribs and spine. It was now metastatic. Metastatic breast cancer (MBC), also known as stage 4, means the cancer has spread outside of the breast to the bones, lungs, liver or brain.

The first thing Margaret asked was if she was going to die. Her doctor’s answer was honest: “I don’t know.” The realization hit Margaret hard. “I had no idea that, in the cancer world, there is treatment to cure you and treatment to just treat you, and that, with MBC, I fell into that second category. I was like, ‘You have to understand that I want to be here. I want to have this baby and I want to see her be born. I want to see her go to school. You have to give me some certainty.’ But that’s impossible with metastatic breast cancer.”

Marianna was born early, at 27 weeks, shortly after Margaret completed her first line of chemotherapy. Seven years later, the future is still uncertain, but Margaret is always looking for glimmers of hope and the possibility of new advancements in treatment. Her daughter is now six and a half, and going into grade one.

“She doesn’t yet fully understand everything about cancer, and thankfully there are child life specialists who help with that. But she knows she was born early and that Mommy was bald when she was born. She likes to say we were baldies together.”

Although her treatment is ongoing, Margaret says her situation has been freeing because she’s no longer bound by a specific plan or vision or other people’s expectations. She just wants to stay healthy for her daughter and prioritize having fun. “I’m free now to focus on what I want my life to look like, for whatever time I have left.”



Margaret @mbc_in_toronto

Same disease, different needs

Supporting younger women with breast cancer means providing information and resources tailored to their age and unique life stage

Young women diagnosed with breast cancer have different concerns compared to older women, and they need to feel heard, supported and educated. “Some women are still in university. Some have just started their careers or are parenting two-year-olds,” says Dr. Christine Brezden-Masley, a medical oncologist and director of the Marvelle

Koffler Breast Centre at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto.

Rethink developed 10 research-informed Care Priorities (left), to address the unique care and support needs of women in their 40s and under during breast cancer treatment and beyond. Here, Dr. Brezden-Masley weighs in on some of the concerns women express in her practice:

ON PRESERVING FERTILITY DURING TREATMENT

For young women, breast cancer can derail family planning. But Dr. Brezden-Masley says they should know they have options, such as freezing their eggs, going into temporary, chemical-induced menopause to protect their ovaries during chemotherapy, or pausing anti-estrogen therapy to allow them to safely become pregnant. “When treating a young woman with breast cancer, it’s about ensuring that she has a full life ahead of her, and if pregnancy is part of that life, we have the means to provide that.”

ON TREATING ALL ASPECTS OF BREAST CANCER, PHYSICAL AND MENTAL

When it comes to treatment, Dr. Brezden-Masley says she is just “the quarterback” in a multidisciplinary team that includes dietitians, social workers, oncology nurses, chemo nurses, cardio oncologists, psychiatrists and others. “Breast cancer care has developed into many different disciplines coming together to ensure we do the best for our patients,” she says. “When a woman develops breast cancer, we need to ensure she feels supported enough to ask questions about mental health, body image, exercise—all of these things are extremely important.”

ON THE FUTURE OF CARE FOR METASTATIC BREAST CANCER

Even with a diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer, women are surviving with ongoing therapy and no evidence of active disease, Dr. Brezden-Masley says. In many cases, it becomes about treating the cancer as a chronic disease, like diabetes or hypertension, she adds. Dr. Brezden-Masley is excited about research developments in treatment, such as molecular-targeted therapies that zero in on specific tumour signatures. “We continue to push the envelope,” she says. “We continue to advocate for patients to ensure there will be new improvements in cancer care delivery.”



We stand together.

For 25 years, Rethink Breast Cancer has been changing the conversation around care for younger women. The TELUS team is proud to stand alongside that work, helping raise more than \$1.5 million in support of education, research and advocacy.

As our partnership grows, so does our shared vision to inspire connection, community and care. This includes helping build the Rethink House, a supportive space for women across their breast health and cancer experience.

Let's make the future friendly, together.

