

# Cancer Treatment During Pregnancy

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[00:00:03] **Stephen Calabria:** From the Mount Sinai Health System in New York city, this is Road to Resilience, a podcast about facing adversity. I'm your host, Stephen Calabria, Mount Sinai's Director of Podcasting.

[00:00:13] Today in the program, in honor of World Maternal Health Day, we welcome Willana Mack. Ms. Mack is a professional singer originally from Brooklyn and serves Music Director of the Central Baptist Church in New York City.

[00:00:27] She was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer in January 2022. Within a week, she discovered she was pregnant, and soon found herself struggling to find doctors to provide her the life saving care she needed.

[00:00:40] Then she came to Mount Sinai, and her story serves as a model of faith and determination. We're honored to welcome Ms. Mack to the program.

[00:00:47] Ms. Willana Mack, welcome to Road to Resilience.

[00:00:53] **Willana Mack:** Thank you, Stephen.

[00:00:54] **Stephen Calabria:** Okay, and so can you tell us, you started out your journey, that we're here to talk about today, with two children, is that right?

[00:01:02] **Willana Mack:** That's correct. So in January of 2022, my world just completely changed. There was an evening I was laying in bed, I was watching TV. And I, as vividly as I recall, I heard a voice or just a nudge from, had to be heaven, said, touch here.

[00:01:20] And I took my right hand and I touched my left breast and I felt a big ball, felt like a marble, Was underneath my skin and I asked my husband check this out is this thing weird to you? And he just pressed it and he responded. This is strange. You should get this looked at.

[00:01:40] Oh, so I went to sleep woke up the next morning called people called my mom and said hey, I found this What do you think and my mom's answer was you need to get that checked out Immediately, had been seeing a

hematologist and I just was going to see her that day for treatment for an iron infusion.

[00:01:57] And when I got there, I said, I found this last night. What do you think? And, , I remember when she touched it, she said, I don't know what this is. I don't like it. I'm going to send you for a mammogram and ultrasound immediately. And that just began this journey. That, that changed my world.

[00:02:18] **Stephen Calabria:** When did they give you a diagnosis?

[00:02:20] **Willana Mack:** It was in about two weeks from when I found the lump that I had an official diagnosis, between the mammogram ultrasound, which led to a biopsy, which was very strange. And then within one week of the biopsy, I decided to be a busybody and check my chart and read the notice that had just come through to my chart and the only word I saw, it might as well have been a neon sign flashing, was malignant.

[00:02:49] **Stephen Calabria:** Usually not a good sign.

[00:02:50] **Willana Mack:** I know, I don't know, I didn't know much. I know much more now. I didn't know much then, but I knew there was one word I didn't want to see and that was the word malignant. Malignant.

[00:03:01] **Stephen Calabria:** And what were you thinking at the time?

[00:03:03] **Willana Mack:** I was terrified. I was terrified. I remember my heart sank.

[00:03:08] I can feel it right now with just everything I knew to be true. Everything I knew, everything I relied on just was gone and everything changed immediately. And it was terrifying. Within that process, you mentioned I have two children.

[00:03:23] I had two children. I noticed, women know when things are supposed to change. How the cycle works. And I was about one week late on my period and I said, this is strange. And I'm just minding my business and I decide I should take a home pregnancy test.

[00:03:43] And my home pregnancy test came back positive the day before I went in for my biopsy.

[00:03:50] **Stephen Calabria:** What was going through your mind at the time?

[00:03:53] **Willana Mack:** First of all, I didn't think I could have any more children. It was just disbelief and shock. I looked around the bathroom by myself and said, Who's pregnant in here? It can't be me. But it was total disbelief.

[00:04:07] And so when I read my MyChart results, too soon, the first thing I started thinking about is, but I'm pregnant. This can't happen. This can't happen like this. The first stop on the journey was to confirm the pregnancy.

[00:04:24] As I had mentioned, I had only had a home pregnancy test, and so I went to go see my original doctor, and her advice was we have to go, we have to get you to an OBGYN to get a real scan done so that we can confirm this pregnancy is even viable.

[00:04:40] And then we need to take the next steps. But I remember her words as clear as day. She says Pregnancy and breast cancer don't mix. And, I said, okay. And I went home and I cried. I went home, got into bed, I just started crying. And, after I stopped crying, I started to say, okay, don't cry.

[00:05:01] Pray. What is it you need? What do you need? And I said, and I realized I need time. She kept saying it's not the right time. So, I said. God, give me time, just give me the time. And then I just started making doctor's appointments. I started calling different hospitals. I called cancer centers.

[00:05:21] I called other practices and I just would tell people my story. I would tell them this is what's happening. And most, almost everyone I spoke to responded. We don't know what to do. We don't know what to do. Actually, one of the cancer centers actually told me, We can't treat you.

[00:05:40] Because we are not a hospital, and if something happened, we are not equipped to treat you. I went in, I confirmed my pregnancy. I saw a little heartbeat. I said, that's a heartbeat? And the baby was tiny, it was about seven weeks.

[00:05:54] The GYN said, that's the heartbeat. And she showed me everything. She said, that's the sac. And I'm sitting there, oh my goodness, this is amazing. I don't know what I'm gonna do.

[00:06:02] **Stephen Calabria:** Well, one of those alternatives was people advising you, both medical practitioners and lay people advising you just to terminate the pregnancy. Is that right?

[00:06:13] **Willana Mack:** It was almost as, it was almost everywhere I turned. Everyone. Everyone had the same response. Why don't you just terminate? Why don't you just terminate? You're only six weeks. You're only seven weeks. You're only eight weeks. What's the problem?

[00:06:29] Did you plan on having any more children? You didn't want any more children. You, you have two beautiful children anyway. And, this is doctors. This is family. These are religious leaders. It was almost as if no one was in my corner to do this, but I knew I could do it.

[00:06:48] **Stephen Calabria:** So what did you do?

[00:06:49] **Willana Mack:** That's when I realized I needed a specialist. I needed to find a place that I could go that could treat both the pregnancy. And the cancer and when I hauled different places, it didn't seem right. It just wasn't the right.

[00:07:04] If it didn't feel right, I wasn't going to do it. And so I would hang up and say, no, that's not the place. No, that's not the place. No, those are not the people. And then I got on the internet and I started to look for a breast surgeon, a breast cancer surgeon who could do something if I was pregnant.

[00:07:20] I didn't even know what I was Google searching for. If you would see my search history, it made no sense. Breast cancer surgeon who can treat you pregnant. It, no sense. Well, it's not a very common situation I imagine, yeah. I couldn't even, I didn't even have the words to, to articulate what I needed.

[00:07:39] But Google directed me towards Dr. Welts and Dr. Welts is a surgical oncologist at Mount Sinai. And I just read a little bit about Dr. Welts and I said, okay, she seems cool. That being Dr. Christine Welts. Dr. Christine Welts. W E L T Z.

[00:07:58] And I called to make an appointment. And whoever picked up, I told her everything like I've been telling everyone. And she just, she says, Wow, what a story. I think we can help you. And I just, I felt peace. I felt calm and it felt right.

[00:08:18] It felt like this was I said, this is it and I made an appointment and I got in and I saw Dr. Welts and she is, she's intense. She's an intense woman. And she sat across from me and I told her everything and I said, I'm pregnant, I'm nine weeks and I'm struggling to find a place to go.

[00:08:40] And she says, Well, in your case, we'll do what we can now, and we'll do what we can't later. And I'm, what do you mean by that? She said, well, we can't do a lot of scans, we can't do a lot of treatments, but there's a few things we can do. She said, but don't worry, we'll take care of you.

[00:08:59] And now this thing that seemed impossible, felt possible. I said, this can happen. This can happen now because you're willing to help me. You're not willing to dismiss me or offer me an alternative That didn't seem right.

[00:09:17] I knew I could do it. I remember saying to my family, I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy. I promise you guys, I'm not crazy. But this can happen. This can happen. And Dr. Welts was probably the first medical professional I spoke to who didn't tell me initially, have you considered termination?

[00:09:35] All she said was, we'll do what we can.

[00:09:39] **Stephen Calabria:** And what was her strategy?

[00:09:40] **Willana Mack:** She reached out to Dr. Joseph Sparano, who became my medical oncologist. She called him and she told him the situation and he agreed to take me on as a patient. Isn't it interesting that the doctor has to agree to take you on? But he agreed to take me on as his patient.

[00:09:59] And he brought my case before the entire medical oncology staff and, to try and figure out what to do. No one knew what to do. No one had any idea. This is never what they do. And people offered a few alternatives.

[00:10:11] Some said surgery first. Some said, chemo first. Some said, just wait. There were a few. Why is she even doing this? She could just terminate. And, Dr. Sperano called me and he told me, here's what was discussed.

[00:10:25] Here's what I think we should do. I need you to come in. And I came in and now we're finally able to talk face to face after we've consulted with everyone he could think of. And he said, We don't usually do this like this, but here's my thought.

[00:10:41] We will take adriamycin, affectionately known as the red devil. We will give you small doses spread out over, I can't remember the exact time frame, but six, six doses of adriamycin to buy you time to just slow down the growth.

[00:10:59] If we can buy you enough time and slow down the growth, you can have the baby and then we can start aggressive treatment. And that's what I did.

[00:11:09] **Stephen Calabria:** And when was your baby born?

[00:11:11] **Willana Mack:** He was born September 6th, 2022. He was born one month early. He was an itty bitty guy. He was so little, smaller than pack of bread. We actually took him home and we put the bread next to his body because he was so little.

[00:11:26] Those fears about things that happened after pregnancy didn't go away, they were still there, even with all that I had gone through, I said, oh no, this could happen, this sometimes happens after someone has a baby, sometimes women get, I had a c section, so I had to get looked at after the surgery to make sure that was a success.

[00:11:46] But he was feisty. He was funny. You could just tell he was full of personality, as tiny as he was.

[00:11:53] **Stephen Calabria:** From what I know about C sections, it's the only major surgery where You aren't given a great deal of time to return to work. I cannot imagine how difficult that must have been to bounce back from.

[00:12:06] **Willana Mack:** So with the C-section, right? You get to go to the recco, like I went to the recovery room, I got to see the baby quickly. Then they had to whisk him off and do all the things.

[00:12:17] So we did skin to skin after he was born, but then they had to whisk him away and when they brought me to my room. You immediately have to start moving like they make you move and I can't move and it's, you have to get up, you have to do this, you have to do that.

[00:12:33] And so I'm trying to move around with this little person after this major surgery in this room by myself. It was still in a weird time within society, so you weren't allowed lots of visitors. So it was really just me. I was allowed two visitors a day.

[00:12:54] Which was actually a lot, considering how bad it was but most of the time it was just me and my nurses, and this baby. And I'm trying to do what I can, and he's tiny. He's tiny, so I'm trying to be really gentle with him. I'm trying to nurse, trying to do these things. And then you have four days in the hospital, and you go home.

[00:13:13] Then they sent me home, and there's no nurses at home. There's no nurses to help with nighttime feedings. My husband was actually working overnight at the time, so I have no help in the evenings.

[00:13:24] It's me, my children. And our dog at night, and it's after the surgery, and I'm trying to move around and do the things that I need to do. And it's hard. It's so hard.

[00:13:35] I was given one month to nurse. Which was sad, because I really wanted to nurse him. I actually tried to pump to get enough milk, that didn't work. But, um, I was given one month to nurse the baby before I had to start aggressive treatment.

[00:13:48] **Stephen Calabria:** So people often talk about the first thousand days of a child's life being crucial in their development, crucial for you as a parent to help guide them, I imagine that was made that much more perhaps difficult with your diagnosis. How did those thousand days play out for you?

[00:14:10] **Willana Mack:** We're still in those thousand days. He's two. So we're still in there. We're still figuring things out. I was terrified when he was first born because I knew he had gone through chemo with me.

[00:14:20] And so now I'm trying to look for anything that might just be a little bit concerning because we just don't know. So he'd do some quirky things here and there and I'd say, is this normal?

[00:14:33] And the doctor would say, that's normal. Okay, nevermind. And then something else would happen and say, is this normal? That's fine. I actually took him for his two year checkup.

[00:14:45] And I said, listen, he doesn't talk a lot. Is that okay? The doctor said, he talks. He talks. And if you, even if he doesn't, it's okay. I'm constantly looking for another shoe to drop because I know, I've really put him in a position while in utero that was a little bit, that was scary. And he didn't have a choice in the matter. He just was there with me.

[00:15:06] And so I was scared for him. But I'm happy to say he is healthy. He is smart as a whip. He's a jokester. He hides from us. Is he playing hide and seek? I don't know. No, we're not in the middle of hide and seek, Casey.

[00:15:20] Please come out. But he reached all of his milestones and I just felt a bit of peace every time he would reach a milestone because I knew it was uncharted territory to put him in that position.

[00:15:33] And he's still in those first 1,000 days. And we're always, I'm happy to say that he's healthy and smart and fun. And we just, we don't know, we just keep watching him and keep praying that he continues on this road of just growth,, and development.

[00:15:47] And as a mom, those first three months are probably the scariest time after you have a baby. These are those three months, your body is still, they call it the fourth trimester. And so in that fourth trimester, couldn't even really relax and just be in that space because I had to get right back to work.

[00:16:08] **Stephen Calabria:** What are you figuring out now about having a toddler that you didn't know the first time around?

[00:16:12] **Willana Mack:** I am tired. He's a boy. He's my only son. He is not like his sisters. He is his own little person with his own personality. And I'm just, I'm learning a different type of patience.

[00:16:30] His little quirky things, like climbing on things, they didn't do that. Putting things in his mouth, what are you doing here? He has his own words. I have to decipher them, because if you've ever talked to children before, they have their own language.

[00:16:44] And people say, he says, of course I know what he's saying, he's my child.

[00:16:47] I understand his language. But you're constantly figuring him out. And he is not, they're not carbon copies of each other. They're all, they were all different toddlers. And I had to mother everybody differently.

[00:17:00] But I'm mothering him, as much love as I possibly can, but with as much energy as I possibly can. But I'm also relying on his older siblings to help, to play with him, to do these things.

[00:17:13]

[00:17:13] **Willana Mack:** And it doesn't make me a bad mom that I need help now. I needed help before, but it's okay to say, Hey, I need help. Hey, I need



somebody to make this bottle. Hey, I need somebody to sit with him for a minute.

[00:17:25] It's okay to need help. You're still a good mom if you need help. You're still a good mom if you ask for help. You're still a good mom if you cry. You're still a good mom when you don't want to do it. There are moments where I go, Wow, I have so many kids. I actually say that out loud and I laugh. Is it? But I can do this.

[00:17:45] It doesn't make you a bad mom. It's hard to be a mother, but that's okay.

[00:17:52] When I started treatment, I started to approach it as, small goals, small steps. First get through this, then get through that, then get through that. And it was, the timeline that was laid out gave me those milestones to make.

[00:18:04] When I finished my first six rounds of chemo during pregnancy, that was a big deal for me. So we did it. I remember I would lay down and I would rub my belly. I said, Casey, we did it. We didn't have a name yet.

[00:18:16] Like, baby, we did it. So we did it. And, then I had to have him. And I said, we did it. We made it. We've made it past another hurdle, right? We got another check mark. And then we made it past the first month.

[00:18:33] And then I was sad because now it's time to start. But real nitty gritty and it wasn't just me and him at home, bonding, having a good time laughing together while I'm laughing and he's crying.

[00:18:48] We're past that milestone. Now I'm at my 12 weeks of treatment. That's a different hurdle. And it was at the 12 weeks where I finally got to ring the bell. And it felt like I was finished, except I wasn't. After those 12 weeks. I had radiation, then I'm finished.

[00:19:04] Okay, we, but you also need surgery. Oops, rewind back. Oh, I have to do surgery. Then I have to have radiation. There's residual cancer cells. You have to have more treatment. So each of these were just one, one mark to hit.

[00:19:19] And every time I hit one of those marks for myself, I was able to say, I did this. I did this. I did that. At the same time, I'm looking at my son and trying to make, His milestones and I'm on the internet, I'm on the bump and all those other websites that keep up with the baby's development at four weeks, your baby should be blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

[00:19:40] And at eight weeks he should be. And now we're at the three month mark. We're out of newborn stage. Now we've crossed over into infant territory. Okay, what should he be doing? And I'm watching him reach these milestones and it's lining up. with times where I'm finished on certain steps in my journey.

[00:20:01] And someone says, if we're doing this together, as you continue to grow and you continue to develop, I'm checking these boxes, what would I have to do? And we get to this point together where it's, hey, I'm done. Like, I've done this part. And, Kacey, you have passed these parts. You've passed these hurdles.

[00:20:21] And you're developing into this little man, this little person with the personality. And I'm now able to find myself again. I'm at the hospital all the time for this treatment. I'm at the hospital all this time for this treatment, where the treatment had consumed me. Because that was it.

[00:20:38] That's what I had to do, was treatment. And when I was able to finally finish all the treatments, now it's time for me to focus on me and getting myself back together. And now I have time to focus on my family over here, because I've checked all my boxes.

[00:20:56] And now I can stay with you guys, as you continue to develop and you continue to grow.

[00:21:01] **Stephen Calabria:** How did your medical team guide you through the challenges of managing the cancer treatment afterwards?

[00:21:08] **Willana Mack:** They were great. My, my team worked together. Actually, if you look at my MyChart, it has Willana Mac's care team, and it has everyone on there. It has nurses, it has doctors, it has my OB. And they would refer back to, the MyChart to see notes from each other suggestions from each other, even just how I was feeling.

[00:21:27] All of these things were in my MyChart. I would go into an appointment with Dr. Spirano and say, Oh, I saw you saw Dr. Bianco last week and you had this, he would say something.

[00:21:38] How do you know? I didn't come to see you. Oh, you read my MyChart. And she may have left a little note for him. This was uncharted territory for everybody, including Dr. Sperano, who is a genius, and he would say, Don't take any of the medications that people normally would take.

[00:21:55] So I'd gone to the pharmacy and I had all the desk full of medication for side effects. I had anti-nausea meds. I had this meds, I had this meds had this for pain I had this to get my white blood cell count back up all these medications

[00:22:11] And he said, don't take any of them because I don't know what it's gonna do to the baby.

[00:22:15] **Stephen Calabria:** And your baby was born one month early at four or five pounds. You had started chemo, if I'm not mistaken, when you were 14 weeks pregnant.

[00:22:27] **Willana Mack:** And then Dr. Sparano had to just decide which treatment to give me, which would have the least amount of side effects. Well, the one with the least amount of side effects was most frequent treatment.

[00:22:37] In his brain, the higher dosage, which would come back every three weeks, had carry a higher risk of side effects. So the smaller dose that was weekly had less side effects. So I had weekly tax. I had 12 weeks of chemo every Monday. For 12 weeks, I would come in for chemo. for chemo.

[00:22:56] And, oh, it was so bad. I used a cold cap system so that I wouldn't lose my hair. So it was this really cold hat, that I would have to wear before treatment. I'd have to wear after treatment. They would ice my fingers. They would ice my toes.

[00:23:12] It was everything to try to prevent a lot of these side effects because I had to go home and care for a baby. And I had to go home and care for my other children who did not let up just because there was a baby.

[00:23:24] **Stephen Calabria:** And how old were they?

[00:23:26] **Willana Mack:** When I was diagnosed, my oldest was, uh, she, she was 11. She's 13 now. Yes, so, she was 11. And Sydney was 7. Now they're 13.

[00:23:37] **Stephen Calabria:** So not the easiest age, either.

[00:23:39] **Willana Mack:** Oh no, horrible, horrible, horrible age. One going on middle school and another one In elementary school, and they need everything. And they're like mommy this, mommy that.

[00:23:48] **Stephen Calabria:** And that age group is challenging regardless of what it is that they're going through. And I imagine even more so when they have a parent who's been diagnosed with cancer.

[00:24:00] **Willana Mack:** My oldest, she was in her senior year in elementary school. And I remember her teachers had written me because she wasn't completing her work. And that was strange because she was doing her work. She's gone on to still not complete her work, but that's neither here nor there.

[00:24:15] Back then, she was completing her work. And I had to reach out to her teachers and I said, listen, I have to let you know what's going on in my house right now. And I told them everything I said, and I need you to give her some grace. Because we're trying here, but this is hard.

[00:24:33] And, her teachers wrote back and said, we're, we'll look after her. And they really stepped up. They really were constantly on her. Did you do your work? Did you do your work? They were on her so much that she got recognized when she graduated. She got an award.

[00:24:45] She got like a humanitarian award. Yeah, it wasn't because of her. It was just, she was just a really good kid. And they could tell she started to try. But it was difficult to try to mom in this process, because something has to give.

[00:25:02] **Stephen Calabria:** The role of family and support, having a support network is crucial. And how was that at that time?

[00:25:10] **Willana Mack:** Everyone stepped up a lot. I come from a large family. I'm number five of eight. And, once it was happening and everyone knew I'm having this baby, then everyone came on board. My sister agreed to take the baby.

[00:25:24] Sometime when I was going through treatment, my mom helped with the baby sometime. My dad helped as much as he could help. My husband tried to do what he can do, tried to be as supportive as he could be.

[00:25:39] And my church, lots of friends, people, my, my co workers at the time would take over my classes and just teach so that my students would still have class even though I can't be there this week. And everyone really stepped in to, to do a lot of the heavy lifting when I couldn't do it.

[00:25:57] **Stephen Calabria:** Even with those people around, I imagine that you throughout this process had to develop strategies and practices to help you stay resilient. Were there any specific ones that you developed for yourself?

[00:26:09] **Willana Mack:** I leaned into my faith, I leaned into my beliefs, I just leaned into that as much as possible to find strength when I didn't physically have the strength, and I had to start listening to my body a lot more, so if I would say, I can do this, and I would just will myself to do whatever it was, I would will myself to come home and cook dinner, I would do it.

[00:26:30] And if I was in the middle of cooking dinner and my body said, why don't you go sit down? I would have to go sit down and order a pizza. We can't do this right now. And I really had to be honest with myself, I had to give myself some slack.

[00:26:43] I had to realize I'm not failing. If I can't do it, I have to accept the small wins and be okay with that.

[00:26:51] **Stephen Calabria:** Like what? What's a small win?

[00:26:53] **Willana Mack:** Oh, a small win was when I got home from my lumpectomy and my nine year old, she was eight. She had hip hop day at school the next day. And she said, mommy, I don't have anything to wear to hip hop day. And I'm home from lumpectomy.

[00:27:07] Okay. It's the day of. And I said, baby, Okay, let me see. I'm searching the house for anything that could turn her wardrobe into hip hop day. And I found her a snapback hat, and she had a Liberty jersey, and I go on Instacart and I order some lold link chains, some like, it was like a spool of chain and I take it and I make, actually made chains for her so that she could look like 90s day.

[00:27:39] Nobody knew what I had gone through that day. Oh no, she said, mommy, I don't have anything to wear. And I said, I can do this. And the next day she goes to school and she looks like she has on this hip hop wardrobe to the point where she was in pictures.

[00:27:53] Her teachers were taking pictures of her saying, Sidney, you look great. And she was so happy. She came home, she said, Mommy, look, they took pictures of me. And I said, You did it! You did it, you did this for her and you made her happy, even though it's, it seemed like nothing, but it was so important to her.

[00:28:10] **Stephen Calabria:** In the grand scheme, yeah, I imagine it seemed really minuscule compared to what it was that you were going through, but, we talk a lot on this show about having a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and deriving meaning and purpose from what it is that you do, what it, What gets you out of bed in the morning?

[00:28:27] **Willana Mack:** Honestly, we don't live for our children, but you do. Like you do, they're just things that have to happen for them and if the motivation was to look over and see them, then we're gonna do it.

[00:28:39] Whatever it is, I'm gonna make it happen. Because I don't want you to, I don't want you to be left out. I don't want you to feel like, It gets, it's hard. It's hard. It's hard anyway.

[00:28:50] **Stephen Calabria:** Even with your support network and your faith and your team of incredible doctors here at Mount Sinai that are second to none, were you ever scared?

[00:29:00] **Willana Mack:** I was scared at first. I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to die. And as I, as I look back, I said, you really, what's wrong with you? You got this. You can do it. But at the time it seemed impossible.

[00:29:13] It seemed like everything was against making this happen. And it really took me to take a second to breathe, to pray, to, to meditate, to really just focus, to realize it's impossible, but it can still happen. You can still do this.

[00:29:38] **Stephen Calabria:** Was there a presence of any other cancer survivors or expectant mothers? Did you draw strength or inspiration from them?

[00:29:49] **Willana Mack:** So, my mother is a cancer survivor. She was diagnosed with liposarcoma when she was pregnant with my youngest brother. She was six months pregnant and they were doing routine pregnancy scans and they happened to see this mass next to the baby and it turned out it was cancerous.

[00:30:08] And, this was a long time ago. My brother's 31 now. I think he's 31. And, it was very different then. It was very different. And they did surgery first. Then she had the baby. And then they did chemo afterwards.

[00:30:21] And after watching my mother go through what she went through, I said, we can do anything. I used to tell my mom, you're a superhero. You're my superhero. And if you can do it, I can do anything.

[00:30:33] And I truly believe it. I really did. We sat home waiting for my mom to die. They told us, she will die. Remember she said the doctor told her, you'll never work again. When she said, when can I go back to work?

[00:30:46] Said, you'll never go to work again. I said, ah, you can do this. She can do it, 30 years ago, I can do it.

[00:30:55] **Stephen Calabria:** And she has how many grandchildren now?

[00:30:58] **Willana Mack:** Twenty seven? Twenty eight? Was the twenty eighth one just born? There's so many of us.

[00:31:04] **Stephen Calabria:** So you could say she came out the other side pretty well off.

[00:31:07] **Willana Mack:** Oh yeah.

[00:31:08] **Stephen Calabria:** Looking back on your journey, how would you say this experience shaped your perspective on resilience and motherhood?

[00:31:16] **Willana Mack:** I think through resilience, anything is possible to just keep trying. My professor told me one time, he said, you keep hitting your head against a brick wall until the brick wall gives.

[00:31:26] You let that brick wall give out, and it seems impossible. And I really think through resilience, anything is possible, even when it seems like there's no way it can happen.

[00:31:36] Motherhood is a journey. I'm figuring things out every day. My 13 year old and my 2 year old are very different people. And then I got my 9 year old, my great equalizer in the middle.

[00:31:47] These are very different people. And as a mom, I try to figure them out, and I try to figure myself out in the process. I tell my 13 year old, I've never had a 13 year old before, I don't know what I'm doing.

[00:31:59] I've had a two year old. I still don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm doing half the time, but I do it.

[00:32:05] **Stephen Calabria:** Now, you have a background as a singer, is that right?

[00:32:08] **Willana Mack:** I do.

[00:32:09] **Stephen Calabria:** And, as I discovered, you are actually an Oscar nominated singer.

[00:32:14] **Willana Mack:** It's a many, many moons ago, I had the privilege of being in a movie that was nominated for best original song, yes.

[00:32:21] **Stephen Calabria:** Would you take it all away?

[00:32:24] **Willana Mack:** You know what? I'm not resentful of having cancer. I'm not. I count it as a blessing, as crazy as that sounds.

[00:32:35] Because if my story and my experience can inspire anyone to, to just go for it, to just try to not give up, to keep the faith, to grab on to whatever faith you have and hold on to that. Then it was worth it. It was worth it. As hard as it is.

[00:32:55] **Stephen Calabria:** What advice would you give to someone facing a similar situation?

[00:32:58] **Willana Mack:** Be your own advocate. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Don't be afraid to push back if it doesn't seem right. But to really trust your instincts, trust your gut. Believe in yourself. Just keep pushing, keep fighting, don't give up, do not give up the fight, don't give in.

[00:33:20] **Stephen Calabria:** And so were there any lessons that you took from your time as a singer and performer that you think you applied to the situation?

[00:33:29] **Willana Mack:** So, Singing usually, singing gets me through the day. It does. I sing all day long. My kids actually, Mommy stop singing because that's just what I do. People cook, people exercise. I wish I was people who exercise. I'm not. But I sing. When I was how to be one of those people I don't understand no beef, but but it's just not me but when i'm when i'm having a hard time i'll i'll probably just hum a few tunes and For example something on for



example. Oh, geez amazing Grace How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found.

[00:34:39] **Stephen Calabria:** Willana Mack, thank you so much for coming on Road to Resilience.

[00:34:42] Thanks again to Willana Mack for her incredible story. That's it for this episode of Road to Resilience. If you enjoyed it, please rate, review, and subscribe to our podcast on your favorite podcast platform.

[00:34:54] Want to get in touch with the show or suggest an idea for a future episode? Email us at podcasts at mountsinai. org.

[00:35:01] Road to Resilience is a production of the Mount Sinai Health System. It's produced by me. Stephen Calabria and our executive producer Lucia Lee from all of us here at Mount Sinai. Thanks for listening and we'll catch you next time.