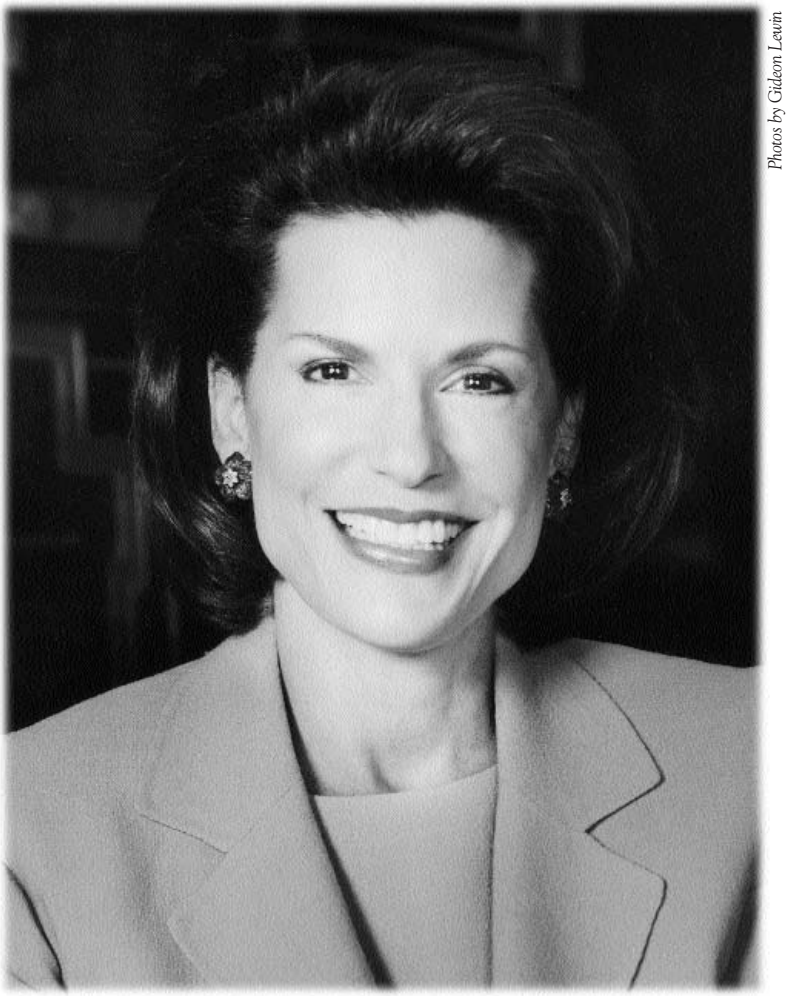

Photos by Gideon Lewin

Nancy Goodman Brinker

living a promise

by Aliza Davidovit

When the svelte, 5'10" brunette beauty walks across a room, her comportment bespeaks elegance, confidence and regal poise. It is remarkable that this first female American Ambassador to Hungary never thought of herself in terms of being beautiful and still remembers herself as the little chubby girl she once was. But Nancy Goodman Brinker was raised to recognize the ephemeral nature of surface beauty and to focus on longer lasting possessions, such as education and knowledge, self achievement and societal contributions—not merely to make an appearance, but to make a difference.

With those values firmly in place, and the support of a loving family, it was much more than her long, shapely legs that led her down the road to success. But Brinker's journey was fraught with grief, hard work, sickness, tears and even despair. Although, today, Brinker holds a prestigious government post, has a close personal relationship with many legislators and members of the administration—including the President and First Lady—and is recognized nationally and internationally with various titles,

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honors and awards, she would give it all up for one simple miracle: to see the beautiful face of her beloved sister, Suzy, just one more time.

In 1977, Brinker was working at Neiman Marcus in Dallas and was in the middle of an executive training seminar when she received a heartrending phone call from her sister, who still lived in their hometown of Peoria, Illinois. Married and the mother of two young children, Suzy called to say she had found a lump in her breast. Although her 33-year-old sister—who Brinker says was as beautiful as Natalie Wood—had had some similar problems before, Brinker knew that this time was different. "I heard it in her voice," Brinker recalls. "I just knew that this time she wouldn't do well." Brinker, who was then married to a Neiman Marcus executive and had an infant son, immediately rushed back to Peoria. When she got off the airplane and saw her father's white and worried face, she knew her ominous instincts were right.

Although Brinker was three years younger than Suzy, while growing up together she always fell into the role of protector and Miss-Fix-It for her homecoming-queen sister, almost into the role of a brother, the boy her father always wanted. "If there was something that needed fixing or boyfriends whose feelings were to be hurt, I was always the hatchet person," Brinker says. "Little did I realize that 20 years later, my sister would call me and tell me, 'We needed to fix the next thing.'"

For the first time ever Brinker couldn't come to her sister's rescue. "There were no comprehensive cancer centers in Peoria at the time and there were no 800-numbers to call," Brinker says, welling up with emotion. When Suzy was finally brought to a cancer center she had to undergo very aggressive treatment, but the cancer would not yield. And so, in August 1980, Nancy Goodman Brinker watched as the sister she adored, the sister who always called her Nan, the sister who taught her how to dress and apply makeup, took her last breaths in this world and succumbed to breast cancer at the age of 36.

Suzy Goodman Komen never thought that she was going to die. Brinker recounts that her sister always spoke in terms of getting better. Even at the lowest point of her illness she made Brinker promise that when cured, together they would do something to fight the disease so that other families would not have to suffer as they did. Little did Brinker realize that her deathbed promise would become her lifelong commitment and culminate into a foundation that would raise $450 million and help support 583 research projects around the world. Until she reached that point, however, it was an uphill battle every step of the way.

After Brinker's first marriage ended in divorce in 1978, she began to volunteer her time for charities and fundraisers. As destiny would have it, she met her next husband, Norman Brinker, in 1980 at one such fund-raiser. They were married on Valentine's Day in 1981.

Norman Brinker, a successful businessman, was sympathetic and supportive of his wife's steadfast commitment to the breast cancer cause, having lost his first wife to ovarian cancer. It was then, in 1982, with the initial financial help of her husband, that she started the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. Nobody realized, including Brinker's husband, that she would remain so devoted to the cause and for so long. "They didn't understand what I had promised my sister and what I meant to do," Brinker says. "Many people thought that I was just a dilettante with a good cause. It was a stereotype that was very difficult for me to escape from."

It was after 20 years of building the Komen Foundation, serving on corporate boards, government commissions, and then being appointed Ambassador to Hungary—in May of 2001—that people began to take her more seriously and realize her sincere and profound commitment to public service.

Brinker understood early on that in order to make true changes in the fight against breast cancer there had to be strong clinical and cultural changes. "In those days people wouldn't even say the words 'breast cancer' out loud; they would shamefully whisper it. All the big corporations, which I believed I could energize to become part of the movement, were all run by men—and they would blush when I brought up the issue," Brinker recalls. Other corporations would dismiss her saying an affiliation with breast cancer would create a negative marketing image. One bra company she approached told her that they sell glamour and beauty, and then abruptly declared that their meeting was over. Brinker could not believe that people were still scared to say the words out loud in face of the compelling statistic that during the Vietnam War 59,000 Americans died and during that same period over 330,000 women died of breast cancer.

But Brinker herself would not be silenced. Reared on the Stanley Marcus philosophy that "no" means "maybe," she continued to knock on every door and raise funds for the Foundation. Although this particular cause was personally motivated, Brinker and her family were hardly neophytes at doing good. Brinker remembers as a little girl that her mother was always on the phone trying to raise money for one thing or another.

"When Suzy and I were growing up, we always had to go along with mother and do good deeds," Brinker reminisces. "We would go to the Red Cross or the homeless shelter, and a lot of other places that didn't have air conditioning during those hot summer days."

Brinker specifically recalls one day when she was just 5, and Suzy was 8. They were sitting in the backseat of the car complaining, preferring to be at the swimming pool with their friends. Their mother, who was so disappointed with their nagging, abruptly stopped the car, pulled them out and said: "Many people have died defending our country. All I'm asking of you young girls is to be good stewards of it." Brinker recalls that she had no idea what a steward was at the time, but she knew one thing for sure: she better be one.

It was not long after that incident that Brinker and Suzy took the initiative and organized a fund-raiser for polio, after one of their childhood friends contracted the disease. The two girls and some other kids in the neighborhood decided to put on a musical variety show to raise some money. Brinker's sister cast her as a dancer and singer, and Suzy was responsible for selling the tickets. "I thought I was so fabulous. I thought I was Shirley Temple," Brinker laughs. "Then at the end of the event my sister called me over and said sweetly that next time she'd sing and dance and I'd sell the tickets."

Despite Brinker's theatrical shortcomings, the young kids raised $64, and that, Brinker says, is how she became a fund-raiser. She thus realized at a very early age the power of individuals and how each person could make a difference.

So despite all the "nos" Brinker heard in the early years of the Komen Foundation, she subsisted on the "maybes" and the belief that she herself could make a difference. That difference was not long in coming. In 1983, Brinker came up with the idea of creating a race for breast cancer awareness. It was to be an event that would focus on the positive—on hope—and would also give women a chance to share and bond, while also raising national awareness. It is called the Race for the Cure. It began as a local race in Dallas with 800 participants and has grown into the largest series of 5-kilometer runs in the world with 112 races across the country. This past June, there were 70,000 participants in the Race for the Cure in Washington, D.C. Seventy five percent of the revenue stays in the host city to support local research, education, screening and treatment programs; the remainder goes to the Foundation for research, grants and scholarships.

Brinker feels that in some divine way she was chosen for this cause. She says that she was blessed with the power of persuasion that she says she inherited from her persuasive mother and a very tenacious father who was once a banker and real estate developer. She was brought up to believe that you never give up and never give in. Her parents who are now in their mid-80s continue to live by that motto. "My father used to always say that courage and hard work will overcome almost everything, except stupidity," Brinker shares. "If you work hard enough and long enough, you make your own luck in life."

But only two years after Suzy died, Brinker's own luck turned bad. One night when she was in bed with her husband, as she pulled up the covers, her hand grazed over her left breast and she felt a hard lump. She jumped out of bed terrified at the discovery. "I was never so scared in my whole life."

Brinker, at age 35, was diagnosed with having the exact same kind of tumor that had killed her sister. "Somehow I had the naive assumption that because I was working so hard on fighting for a cure that it wouldn't happen to me," Brinker confesses. "I had just gotten married, had a young son, a life I loved, a promise to my sister, and all I could see was it all being taken away."

Brinker's cancer treatment was very aggressive. She had surgery and underwent chemotherapy for one year. She also lost her hair. Even now, 20 years later, Brinker says that she still lives in fear. "Once you have this disease, you are never free of it," she says. "Once you've had it, you always feel you have it."

Brinker's own encounter with breast cancer only served to fortify her efforts. She feels certain that her sister is watching over her and has been a part of her mission each step of the way. "Every time I was about to give up or things were going south, something would happen to turn it all around and to further our cause," says Brinker. She believes that it is all because of her sister.

The Race for the Cure is also symbolic of Brinker's own struggle. She came from way behind, only to sprint to the forefront of cancer research in this country. She has advocated health issues before Congress, served under Presidents Reagan and Bush on the National Cancer Panel and under Vice President Quayle monitoring research, progress and development in the fight against breast cancer. She sits on several leading cancer advisory boards. She was awarded the "Humanitarian of the Year Award" by the Republican Women's Leadership Forum in 1999 and is the recipient of several other very meaningful and prestigious awards including *Ladies' Home Journal's* "100 Most Important Women of the 20th Century" and *Biography Magazine's* "The 25 Most Powerful Women in America." She also co-authored two books entitled, *The Race is Run One Step at a Time* and *Winning the Race: Taking Charge of Breast Cancer*.

Although it is hard to say exactly how far along in the "race" Brinker has come, her finish line remains the same: the eradication of the disease. Her midterm goal is to make the disease more manageable and controllable and short

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term goal is to continue to raise public awareness.

She also says that if what researchers already know would be applied, the death rate of breast cancer would be considerably lower. If current trends continue, approximately 192,200 women in the United States will be diagnosed with invasive breast cancer this year and 40,000 women will die. (The National Cancer Institute also estimates that about 1 in 8 (12.8%) women in this country will develop breast cancer during their lifetime.)

It is known that there are a number of non-modifiable factors associated with the increased risk of breast cancer, such as age, family history, early menarche and late menopause. Modifiable factors are alcohol consumption, use of post-menopausal hormones, age of first birth (the younger the better), number of children (the more the better), and obesity after menopause. At present there is no scientific evidence that shows under-wire bras or anti-perspirants increase the risk factor.

Brinker advises women never to assume that they are not candidates to develop this disease. Only 5-10% of breast cancer cases are inherited. She encourages women to be vigilant and to know their own bodies. She adds that most women find their own breast lumps. She points out that women tend to be the caretakers in families and usually "take care" of everyone but themselves. Ashkenazic Jewish women should pay extra attention because they are the inheritors of mutated genes called BRCA1 and BRCA2 that inhibit the tumor suppressing function of an otherwise normal gene. One percent of the Jewish population carries the mutation, a phenomenal number for a cancer-causing gene. Jewish women who have that mutated gene have an 85% chance of developing breast cancer. As such, it is imperative to get tested regularly, because early detection saves lives.

The Talmud teaches that saving one Jewish life is tantamount to saving an entire world. Nancy Goodman Brinker is an embodiment of that teaching: her own life was saved and in turn she has saved a world of lives through her efforts to help women get care and treatment.

President Bush announced on May 23, 2001 that it is because "Brinker is a committed community leader whose efforts in the United States and around the world to raise breast cancer awareness has saved countless lives" that she would serve as the United States Ambassador to Hungary. Though there were some critics who claimed that the newly appointed ambassador had no formal training in foreign policy, they had only to look to President Bush who also had none and yet the war against terrorism showed all Americans and the entire world what our President is really made of. Brinker's own "war" against her personal terror showed many what she was made of as well.

"When history is written, George W. Bush will emerge as one of the greatest presidents that ever lived," Brinker says. "People say he's changed; he hasn't. He is what he always was: a great leader." She also points out that he was the only Texas governor to be re-elected for a consecutive second term. As for Laura Bush, Brinker says, "She is right there with him—a wonderful, intelligent partner with the same character and serenity that gives people confidence and a sense of security."

Brinker is quite a woman herself: She has triumphed over history by being not only the first female U.S. Ambassador to Hungary, but also a Jewish appointee. Between the years 1938 and 1941 there were 800,000 Jews in Hungary; today there are approximately 60,000 to 100,000. She tells how in 1995, when she and her son Eric—who was studying at a university in the Czech Republic—went to visit a museum in Prague, they discovered a gold plaque listing people who had died in the Holocaust. On it was the name of one of her mother's cousins. "I felt like I was hit by a bolt of lightning," Brinker says. "I remember thinking, 'I don't know where or why, but one day fate would send me back to this part of the world.'"

Her post has taken her west of the Danube River to the Official Residence of the American Ambassador in Budapest, where she'll continue to live for two more years until the end of her term. Far away from the family and friends she loves so much, she knows that she is there to do a job. Her official challenges are: to strengthen ties with a good ally, export U.S. democratic values to Hungary's young democracy, and to increase U.S. exports to Hungary.

One particular democratic value that she addressed in a speech is that of "tolerance."

"If you allow people to publicly say hateful things without opposition, that tells the young people it's okay," Brinker says. "It's not okay."

Committed to a life of public service, Brinker has thus far served humanity well, and with the full confidence of the President, she now serves her country.

As her beloved Suzy would always say, "If anything is wrong, Nan can fix it!"

(Vist the following websites for more information: *komen.org/sponsors/bmw.asp*; *komen.org/sponsors/kitchenaid.asp*; *komen.org/sponsors/brinker.asp*. lifestyles