

# ONOMATOPOEIA

## Transcript

### Finding Peace Through Cancer

By Shakti Langlois-Ortega

**SOPHIA ROMERO:** I am a breast cancer warrior. That's the word that I choose to use. I don't have an attachment towards the word survivor.

**SHAKTI LANGLOIS**

**ORTEGA:** That's Sophia Romero. She's sitting on her off-white couch -- surrounded by fluffy cushions.  
Chip, her long-haired chihuahua, is passed out against her thigh.  
Sophia's brown curly hair is straight today. She's wearing large hoop earrings and three gold chains. The middle one is holding a cross pendant.

It's the day before Thanksgiving and her Brooklyn apartment is ready for the holidays -- Christmas tree and all.

The flames of a virtual fireplace are dancing on her 50 inch TV screen.

[TAPE]      *Soft Christmas music*

Sophia is in a festive mood, but that wasn't always the case.

Around the holidays three years ago, she got some news that changed her life.

[TAPE]      *Theme music*

I'm Shakti Langlois-Ortega, and this is Onomatopoeia, a podcast about the people and the places of New York City. In this Episode, beating cancer at 29.

**SR:** Let's take it all the way back. So beginning of 2018 ...

**SLO:** Sophia was living in LA.  
She got out of the shower, one day, and felt a lump on her right

Breast.

She didn't think much of it at first -- she's healthy and wasn't even 30 yet.

But several months went by -- and the lump was still there.

**SR:** Every single doctor that I saw, everybody was like, this looks like something but you're way too young to have breast cancer

**SLO:** So Sophia went on with her life. Between her work at SNAP inc, what used to be called Snapchat, and her active social life -- she was busy.

**SR:** It was a comforting illusion, to sit with. And it was easier to believe that than assume the worst.

**SLO:** But a few days before Christmas, she got a call from her doctor -- asking her to come in immediately.  
That's when she got the news. It was cancer.

**SLO:** There are more than 3.8 million women with a history of breast cancer in the U.S alone.  
Women are usually diagnosed after 50.  
But Sophia has a rare genetic mutation that gave her what she calls an old lady cancer.

**SR:** I did my crying in the office called my mother gave her the bad news. She was at Costco, shopping. And now I've ruined Costco for her.

**SLO:** Sophia's sister, Natalie, happened to be in LA for work. So she extended her trip to be by her sister's side.

**NATALIE ROMERO:** It just sucked to see that she had to be strong when what you want to be is just a fucking mess. You know, like, you want to just scream and be like, why?

**SLO:** Sophia powered through the next couple of weeks -- coasting from one doctors' appointment to the next.  
But there was something she wasn't doing.

**SR:** there was no acknowledgment of my feelings. There was no acknowledgment of what was really happening.  
I was having like this, this beautiful experience, which sounds really weird. I was having a beautiful experience with cancer. So why would I sit down and think of the ugly or the scary or whatever? I wasn't allowing myself to.

**SLO:** Sophia underwent surgery.  
And a few hours later -- the tumor was gone.

[TAPE] [Bad Bunny song "Te Bote"](#)

**SLO:** Shortly after she returned home, Natalie posted a video of her sister dancing and swinging her arms from side to side with her middle fingers up -- singing along Te Bote, which means I threw you out or I got rid of you.

[TAPE] [Sophia singing along](#)

**SR:** I'm listening to the music. And I'm just like, wow, like, that's how I really feel right now. Like, I feel empowered to just be like, now fuck this, like, I control this. You did me wrong. You're getting out of my

life. You would think that I had gone through the worst breakup in the world. And it was literally about cancer.

**SLO:** Sophia was unwilling to put her life on pause for too long. So after only two weeks – she went back to work. But every morning before heading to the office, she got a round of radiation – Monday through Friday, for a full month.

**SR:** I was insane. I should not have done that. But it's what I had to do to get through it. I had to not think about my cancer in order to get through my cancer.

**SLO:** It was also a way to prove to herself that she could do it. That she could kick cancer's ass -- not the other way around. But one night, her shield cracked.

**SR:** I went out with friends, and I was reckless, and just drank way too much. And got in the car with my best friend Sebastian. And he was like, Alright, no bullshit, what's wrong with you? And I looked at him and said, for the first time ever, I just don't want to die.

**SLO:** And then -- 2020 happened. First the pandemic, then the murder of George Floyd. Sophia is a woman of color -- and a diversity specialist in a mostly white tech industry, so the racial reckoning that followed meant that she worked non-stop.

In the midst of it, she packed up and moved back to New York to be closer to her sister. She figured that'd fix everything.

But one Saturday morning, Sophia was venting to her therapist via zoom when she realized that she had reached a boiling point.

**SR:** I looked like I was an addict, tweeting out. // she's like, I've seen

you post-cancer. I've seen you through the end of the world. I've seen you through racial injustice, protests, and you've never looked this bad. She's like, you need to take time off.

**SLO:** So that's what Sophia did -- she took 3 full months -- to process it all.

**SR:** I gave myself the chance to do the freakin work and sit down with myself and be like, alright, cool. so you just rushed in the past three years and craziness in your life? how about you sit with it and actually deal with it? which is not fun. // but i did it. Shout out to therapy.

**SLO:** This holiday season, for the first time in what seems like forever, Sophia can finally breathe.

**SR:** I'm so balanced and happy. I'm dating somebody for the first time in seven years, and like to be able to say that I'm ending the year genuinely at peace, to feel wholeheartedly grounded and at peace, is really dope.

[TAPE]      [theme music](#)

**SLO:** This episode of Onomatopoeia - was created by me, Shakti Langlois-Ortega. Onomatopoeia is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Joanne Faryon is our executive producer and professor. Original theme music by Lee Feldman. Other music by Blue Dot Session. Our graphic was created by Sunni Bean. Special thanks to Columbia Digital Librarian Michell Wilson.