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Interview With Marisa Renee Lee of The Pink Agenda

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After finding out her mother was diagnosed with an incurable, stage 4 breast cancer, days before her graduating from Harvard, Marisa Renee Lee was devastated. After moving to New York, and starting her career in international finance at Brown Brothers Harriman, she decided (after one too many glasses of wine) that it was time to do something in her mother's name on a much larger scale. Her passion and determination have cumulated into "The Pink Agenda", an organization of young professionals committed to raising money for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation. Marisa recently sat down with GofG to explain her organization, and let us in on their annual spring gala held May 15th.

When and why did you start this organization? What has been accomplished by the organization since its founding in 2007?

A few days before graduating college in May 2005, my mother was diagnosed with incurable stage 4 metastatic breast cancer. As a result, I decided to spend a year after college working at home and helping my family adjust to this new diagnosis. Once things were a bit calmer at home and everyone was more comfortable dealing with my mother's illness, I moved to NYC and happily began to pursue a career in international finance.

The relative calm didn't last for long, though, as we learned shortly thereafter that my mother was not responding well to chemotherapy. After spending a few frustrating months balancing the demands of my career with my varied and constant concerns regarding my mom's health, a few too many cocktails and a particularly dramatic episode of Grey's Anatomy inspired me to do something on a larger scale. My roommate (and partner-in-crime)Liana and other close friends jumped on board to lend their support and what was formerly known as Saving Second Base—and is now The Pink Agenda—was born.

Our primary goal at that time was to have a party and raise money to fight breast cancer. The response was fantastic, and since April 2007, we have hosted three events in NYC, one in both Boston and Washington, DC, and we're set to host events in LA and Chicago this year, as well.

The Pink Agenda (TPA) is an organization of young professionals committed to raising money for The Breast Cancer Research Foundation and Susan G. Komen for the Cure, the country's most effective and efficient breast cancer research and direct care service organizations. We hope that our efforts will not only expedite the eventual discovery of a cure for the disease, but that the awareness we raise amongst those in our generation will result in earlier detection, as well as an understanding of where to go for support and resources if ever faced with a breast cancer diagnosis.

I think we've done exactly that since the organization's inception, and we're looking forward to continuing to grow in both size and impact in the years ahead.

What has been the hardest part about getting this organization off the ground?

I had always assumed that competing for funds in New York City where everyone is always fighting over money would be our primary challenge, and while we do have to work extremely hard to fundraise, finding talented and motivated individuals who I believe can represent and eventually run the organization as effectively as we can has proven to be even more daunting.

To create something and then think about handing it over to someone or even handing just pieces of it over to others to manage is incredibly difficult. This organization is more than just an extracurricular activity for me. As long as this disease continues to kill individuals and destroy families, we will continue to take our mission statement, goals, and objectives very seriously, and we're only interested in recruiting those who believe in this as much as we do.

Why is this organization so personally significant to you? How do you manage the organization in addition to your full time job as well as the personal challenges you have recently faced?

This disease has affected—and continues to affect—far too many people. It took my mother's life, and before her death, I promised her that only good things would result from her untimely passing. In fact, I returned to the City very soon after her death to continue work with The Pink Agenda and the planning of our premier event, which is scheduled for May 15. Keeping my promise to my mother, and moving forward with our Spring Gala meant getting back on the train and somehow getting my head back in the fundraising and events-planning game, in addition to working full time.

It has been incredibly challenging, and I do not believe that one actually does anything alone. I have only been able to continue to run this organization with a fantastic board that consists of ten other individuals, our benefit committee, my co-workers, our web designer, and a host of others who have been unbelievably supportive both personally and professionally. The recent personal challenges I've faced have shown us just how fortunate we are that this isn't "The Marisa Show." It's The Pink Agenda, and I know that what we've created organizationally is strong enough to sustain any difficulties that any of us may face personally, myself included.

Why did the name of the organization recently change?

Shortly after my mother's passing, a corporation contacted us regarding what they believed to be a violation of their trademark. While we believe we had a legitimate case and claim to the name, after considering the issue in the most deliberate manner possible and spending countless hours with our incredibly generous attorneys, we determined that, with my mother's recent passing and our rapid growth and development, our best bet would be to move forward as The Pink Agenda and continue to fight this disease in the most direct and aggressive way we possibly can.

Where do you see the organization 30 years from now?

30 years from now, I had better not be running this organization! Writing big checks, maybe, but the organization itself should always be run by and for the benefit of young professionals. I think a huge part of our success is the whole concept that "like attracts like." At the end of the day, we are able to reach this largely untapped demographic primarily because we are that demographic. We know what young people want, and it is different in LA, DC, Boston, Chicago, and NYC, but luckily we have friends all over the place and are able to really target our demographic in each of these cities in a unique and successful way.

What is the main goal for this event?

Our primary goal for this event is to remind everyone that this disease is still a very real threat. My mother attended last year's Gala, and while she'll be there in spirit this year, she will not be physically present because on February 28, after a near three-year battle, this disease claimed her life. Our goal is to remind people that we are still losing wives, mothers, and daughters; but A—we do not have to and B—you should get on board with our agenda. We believe that every individual can contribute to the search for a cure in a very real way by donating time, energy, and funds to the organizations and researchers who are going to find it.

What has been the most fulfilling aspect of starting The Pink Agenda?

About 25 new best friends! Seriously, there is nothing that I value more in life than personal relationships, and starting this organization has given me the ability to meet and befriend so many individuals, many of whom have been personally touched by breast cancer themselves. In addition to the individuals we have been able to reach and I have been fortunate enough to befriend via The Pink Agenda, our board really is a second family. The members of our board, along with a number of my other friends, orchestrated my mother's funeral. I was—and continue to be—fairly anal and "type A," even in the midst of my grief. I absolutely had to have certain pictures, very specific programs, in addition to board members on hand to discuss the organization and collect donations, and they all made themselves 110% available. At the end of the day, regardless of where we all end up or who is or is not able to continue their involvement with this organization, I know I have made some amazing friends.

May 2, 2008 @ 11:45:29 am By RACHELLE J. HRUSKA

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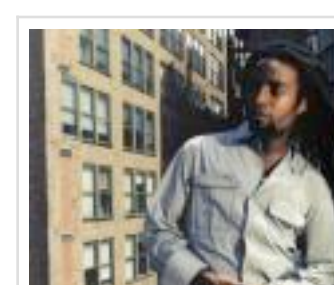
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Saturday, September 12

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You may have heard his kickass snarky solo in Wyclef's Jean's "Tryin' To Stay Alive" or maybe you heard about him when he was nominated for a Grammy for his work with the Fugees. And, sadly, you may have forgotten about him—he had a not-so-brief 7 year sabbatical behind bars. Dannijo sits down with the artist to talk about all of this and more, like his hair.

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