

Inside the
**2026 Big
Pink Gala**

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Inside the ballroom, tall golden centerpieces with glowing lights branched out towards the ceiling; outside, a crowd of people gathered around a whimsical wall where, with the ring of a bell, a gloved hand appeared, offering a glass of champagne. Many galas are built on elegance and a sense of drama; but some have a much deeper foundation. Beneath the glamour of the packed, pink-clad crowd, the striking environs of the Junior League of Austin's Community Impact Center, and the gently lit ballroom itself, at the 2026 Susan G. Komen Big Pink Gala, every ringing of the bell, clink of glasses, and word spoken onstage shared one central message: hope.

Hope was in the uplifting string quartet arrangements of pop and rock songs performed throughout the event by Divisi Strings. It was in the tearjerker videos about women who received wigs and dignity for their cancer journey. And it was central to the journey of the campaign's chairwoman, Patti Kelly.

Nobody expects to be diagnosed with cancer, least of all a 43-year-old mother of two children who had just launched her own business. But in 2024, Patti felt a pea-sized lump in her right breast while going about her normal day-to-day activities with her daughter.

"My husband and I were getting ready to leave for a trip to Spain, and we were dropping off the kids with my in-laws," said Patti, who immediately called her primary care doctor and scheduled a visit after the trip. She went ahead with the trip, hoping to still be able to enjoy the time with her husband. But the worry followed her.

"I tried to put it out of my mind during the trip," she said, "but I found myself feeling for it every day."

Patti had caught her breast cancer early –and early detection is critical so that treatment can begin when the chances of survival are at their highest. Frequently, though, many women assume that, because they feel fine in general, they do not need to get themselves checked out regularly. They may put the needs of their families ahead of their own, pushing aside their healthcare needs. They may not take preventative care, like performing regular breast self-awareness tests, or may not take their symptoms seriously if something feels wrong. But Patti had had a routine mammogram just eight months before she felt the lump in her right breast. That mammogram was perfectly clear. Annual mammograms are the most effective screening tool for early detection, but ongoing breast self-awareness throughout the months in between is just as important, since

health can change rapidly.

“Everything happened so fast,” said Patti. “I didn’t have a lot of time to process it.”

She knew that her early detection gave her the opportunity to move ahead with treatment quickly, so she went ahead with several surgeries, including a double mastectomy, an additional surgery to remove cancer in the margins, and reconstruction surgery. When Patti was asked to share her story at the 2025 Komen Big Pink Gala, she focused on the impact of early

detection and the importance of being fiercely proactive about health. The 2025 Gala raised over \$500,200, and Patti used that experience to fuel her year’s advocacy as Chair of the 2026 Gala.

When on stage at this year’s Gala, Patti was humble. She acknowledged that many women, out of more than 300,000 breast cancer cases this year in the United States and tens of thousands of cases in Texas, have much more severe experiences than her own. But her own story is one of resilience – she refused to give up, not only for herself and her family, but for the





thousands of women around her who were going through similar experiences.

“Because I caught it early, I had options,” Patti said. “I had time. I had hope. And that made all the difference. I was determined to not only beat breast cancer and reclaim my health, but to help others walking this difficult path.”

Cancer and hope are strange bedfellows, but every portion of the night’s proceedings was geared towards encouraging hope in the darkest time. Women diagnosed with breast cancer are far from alone. This was perhaps most clear in the video featuring several breast cancer survivors who had lost their hair during the treatment process and received specially tailored wigs, supported through Komen-funded patient services. Hair may seem simple, but it can represent a sense of normalcy, of healing, and – of course – hope. This kind of gift provides

dignity to women in desperate need of something positive to hold onto. During the video, sniffles and tears were heard throughout the room; and, after the emcee revealed that several of the women featured in the video were in attendance at the gala, they received a prolonged standing ovation in a cascade of hope across the audience.

As emcee, CBS Austin’s Chief Meteorologist Chikage Windler fostered that sense of hope by bringing her own experience as a marathoner and survivor of breast cancer.

“I spent a lot of time in denial,” said Chikage in her opening remarks. “How could I have cancer? I’m a runner, rarely sick at all. I kept my experience private for several years while I came to terms with it. But now – I am stronger than ever and am so honored to help Komen raise funds for a cure.”



see hope.

Breast self-awareness is one simple action every woman can take to own their own health. Some risk factors cannot be controlled, like family history, but others – like maintaining a healthy weight after menopause and limiting alcohol consumption – may play a role in risk. At the same time, breastfeeding, regular physical exercise, and eating a diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables may also be linked to a lower risk of breast cancer. These kinds of simple actions, paired with ongoing breast self-awareness, help empower people – and that empowerment fuels hope. That hope extends outward to communities across the country. It is hope for those currently facing breast cancer, and hope for a future with better outcomes for all.

That night, over \$500,000 was raised to support breast cancer awareness, research, patient support and advocacy. For the more than 340 people that attended the 2026 Susan G. Komen Big Pink Gala, hope is not an abstract idea or a distant promise. Instead, it is something tangible, built through shared stories and the determination of an entire community.

In a room filled with survivors, advocates, families, and supporters, hope was not still. It was spoken. It was funded. It was felt. Long after

The night's theme was "Hope Blooms Here". Blooming is an ongoing act of creation – it isn't something that happens once then never again. Instead, it is continuous, and, like a garden of plants timed to flower at different times in the year, can happen at any point. Without hope, it is hard to act. Without action, it becomes hard to



the lights dimmed and the last glass was cleared,
it remained.