

MAN ON FIRE PRESENTS  
**THE COMBUSTION  
CHRONICLES**

**EPISODE FIFTEEN  
THE POWER OF A BOLD VISION**

HOST: SHAWN NASON  
CO-HOST: MICHAEL HARPER  
GUEST: MYRA BIBLOWIT

**SEPTEMBER 30, 2020**



## EPISODE FIFTEEN The Power of a Bold Vision

WITH MYRA BIBLOWIT

Two decades ago, a friend gave Myra Biblowit a vision and a challenge: cure breast cancer. As CEO of the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, Myra has made major strides towards that goal. She believes a bold vision inspires you to take risks and happily fail forward. In this week's episode, we learn how Myra's passion to fulfill her vision inspires commitment, creativity, and support and how her willingness to take bold risks has helped her achieve big results.



The Breast Cancer  
 Research Foundation



The Breast Cancer  
 Research Foundation



@bcrcure

### THEMES & INSIGHTS

1. Success in the evolution of breast cancer prevention and treatment comes from focusing on the problem rather than on one particular solution or treatment.
2. Don't get caught up in the idea or product you think will solve the problem. Instead focus on understanding the problem itself first.
3. Game-changing research brings high risks but also high rewards. Given limited resources, flexibility and the ability to pivot based on answers from research is fundamental.

### COMBUSTION QUOTES

“At the end of the day, investing in science is truly the only path to a safer, healthier future for all of us and for future generations.”

“A decade ago, we thought breast cancer was one disease. Today, we know it's four or five different diseases, and each has more in common with other forms of cancer than with each other. We're focusing increasingly on prevention strategies. So, there's a whole spectrum of opportunity [in understanding metastatic disease], and it is mining that spectrum that is what has produced the 40-percent decline in breast cancer deaths.”

“The risk is that it might not work. But ... if you don't throw it up and see what lands and what sticks, you can't make progress.”

### RESOURCES

[BREAST CANCER RESEARCH FOUNDATION](#)

[AUTHORITY MAGAZINE](#)

[THE END OF BREAST CANCER? THE ANSWERS LIE IN](#)

**Shawn:** Welcome to "The Combustion Chronicles" podcast, where bold leaders combined with big ideas to create game-changing disruption. I'm Shawn Nason, founder of Man on Fire, and your host for "The Combustion Chronicles." Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future. We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us. I'm here with my co-host Michael Harper.

[00:00:44]

**Shawn:** On today's episode, we're speaking with Myra Biblowit, President and CEO of the Breast Cancer Research Foundation. Since April of 2001, Myra has been President of the Breast Cancer Research Foundation at the request of her friend and founder of BCRF, Evelyn Lauder. From July of 1997 until March of 2001, she served as Vice Dean for External Affairs for the New York University School of Medicine and Senior Vice President of the Mount Sinai NYU Health System. Additionally, from June of 1991 to June of 1997, Myra was Senior Vice President and Executive Director of the capital campaign for the American Museum of Natural History.

[00:01:28]

The Breast Cancer Research Foundation supports research worldwide focused on developing new treatments, understanding metastatic breast cancer, and figuring out what causes it in the first place. They donate 88% of their revenue to research and are the highest-rated breast cancer charity in the country. In 2001, BCRF committed \$8.5 million to fund 50 researchers in the U.S. And in 2019, BCRF committed \$66 million to fund 275 researchers across 14 countries. Myra, welcome.

[00:02:07]

**Myra:** Thank you so very much. I'm delighted to be here.

[00:02:10]

**Shawn:** What a bio, what a story. You know, your relationship and friend, Evelyn Lauder, when you walked into this...so, in an open letter as President/CEO of the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, you said, "When I first met Evelyn Lauder, she inspired me with her vision to create an international movement to end breast cancer." Myra, do you feel like you're getting closer to reaching Evelyn's vision?

[00:02:36]

**Myra:** I do, I do. It's been, for me, the most gratifying thing I've ever done, to lead this organization for 19 years, and to take it from what was, as you just described, a domestic program to now a large global engine harnessing ideas around the world. But since we were founded, the proof is in the pudding, deaths from breast cancer have declined by 40%, and we now have the largest cohort ever in history of survivors, 3.8 million people in the U.S. alone who have gone through breast cancer and come out the other side. That's the power of

research. There's light at the end of the tunnel. But Evelyn used to say, "The only barrier to eradicating this disease is funding." And we are closer than we've ever been. This urgency to prevent and cure breast cancer, it's as urgent as it was nearly 30 years ago when we founded BCRF. In spite of the advances, women and men are still being diagnosed. So, we feel tremendous urgency and opportunity.

[00:03:42]

**Shawn:** You know, Myra, one of the things that you just said...and I really don't think our listeners...I know I didn't really understand it. Just wanted you to talk a little bit about this. But you just made a statement that said, "We're closer to finding cures for both women and men in breast cancer." Can you just share a little bit? Because we always hear about breast cancer for women but not really in men. Can you share a little bit about that, and even how you guys approach that?

[00:04:13]

**Myra:** Well, you know, men, under 2,000 cases a year compared to, you know, the vast number of women. Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women worldwide, about 2 million cases a year, and the most common cancer in American women, 268,000 women. And, actually, the figure for men in the last year alone was 2,670 men were diagnosed. So, it is a very relevant topic for both men and women. And we always say, also, that breast cancer doesn't just affect women, it affects their husbands, their children, their families. But the research that we're doing is informing the resolution of the disease for most people, men and women.

[00:05:01]

**Shawn:** Thanks for sharing that. I think people don't understand that is a, although it's still a very low number, that is something that men deal with. And, you know, kudos to you and the organization. I was able to attend your Virtual Hot Pink Evening this year and learned so much more about what was taking place. When you look back, you know, Myra, over your past 18 plus years, the world can learn from so much of the research that you guys are funding and moving forward. What do you think right now is the most effective research you're doing, the most exciting research you're doing that can really put a dent into this horrible disease?

[00:05:48]

**Myra:** Well, Shawn, you highlighted our work in metastatic disease, and the reality is that most deaths from all cancers are the result of metastatic disease, which is when cancer spreads from the primary organ and plants itself elsewhere. And that's the game-changer. We want to understand what it is that enables certain tumors to travel. We want to figure out how to differentiate the tumor that will never leave the primary site from a tumor that has the capacity, because you obviously throw a different set of therapies on the one that will stay local to the one that travels, and we want to understand, when tumors send stray cells elsewhere, they often park themselves for a long period of time, what triggers dormancy to activation and how do we deactivate it.

[00:06:39]

So, we are hard at work on what is the largest global initiative to unravel the mechanisms of metastatic disease. And I will say that, over time, research has become less organ-specific. So, while we are the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, make no mistake, the findings that are emerging from our research are informing and accelerating the resolution of a multiplicity of other cancers. But I would say that the biggest problem to resolve, and the biggest opportunity, and where we have put north of \$30 million already is into understanding metastatic disease. We are also funding across the spectrum of opportunity. We fund basic research in the lab, we fund clinical research. The goal is to get more therapies to patients, to understand how to develop targeted therapies.

[00:07:34]

You know, a decade ago, we thought breast cancer was one disease. Today, we know it's four or five different diseases, and each has more in common with other forms of cancer than with each other. So, one may behave more like a prostate cancer, one may behave more like a melanoma, or more like a lung cancer. So, increasingly, research is drilling down to the cellular aberrations that underlie all cancers, and there is the opportunity, if a patient is diagnosed, to understand the tumor type and the kind of cancer, and then pluck from the armamentarium the right therapy for that kind of cancer. And we're focusing increasingly on prevention strategies. So, there's a whole spectrum of opportunity, and it is mining that spectrum that is what has produced the 40% decline in breast cancer deaths.

[00:08:29]

**Shawn:** That's some amazing numbers. You know, the more and more I've learned about breast cancer, working with different organizations, truly inspired and in awe at all the work you guys are doing. So, thank you, Myra, for that.

[00:08:44]

**Shawn:** In an interview last year with Medium...I love this, you gave a piece of advice that you received yourself, again, from Evelyn Lauder, to, "Bite the mic when you speak." (Myra laughs) So, could you tell us more about what that means to you and how "biting the mic" goes beyond just public speaking?

[00:09:04]

**Myra:** Evelyn was my dear friend, and she was a brilliant marketer, she had the most incredible instincts and vision. And when I came to the foundation and, truly, I did begin to speak more and more publicly, she would say, "Bite the mic, bite the mic." But really what she was saying was, "Get the message out. Be clear. Be succinct. Really convey your message in a compelling way that people can take that soundbite, take that message, and go with it, understand it." So, it was really with her fine eye that I became a good ambassador for BCRF, able to talk about our mission, able to articulate where the money was going, able to help donors understand the opportunity to invest in the ROI in terms of human life. But really, it was Evelyn's advice to be a bold speaker, control the conversation in terms of messaging and persuasion.

[00:10:07]

You know, we're all about persuasion because science is faith. You gotta understand that investing in science is where the answers will come. But, you know, we're not a campus with a facility, we're not a campus with alumni, we are a far-flung organization with 275 investigators across 14 countries. So, I can't say, "Here it is," I have to persuade with words. And that really was the tool that Evelyn gave me. And, you know, right now the public's interest in science has never been more exquisite, and hopefully we can seize it, because when COVID is under control and, God-willing, it will be, people will still be being diagnosed with breast cancer and we will still be losing lives to breast cancer. So, at the end of the day, investing in science is truly the only path to a safer, healthier future for all of us and future generations. And I learned to articulate that persuasive case, I hope, at Evelyn's knee and with her partnership.

[00:11:19]

**Michael:** That's so interesting that you mention the science part, because science, you think left brain, you think data, you think test tubes and laboratories, and you're being called upon to tell stories about the humans of it. Did you find that science and the human story intention, is it a choreographed dance? How do you approach bringing all that together?

[00:11:47]

**Myra:** Well, you know, the art for us is to bring the patient to life because we're not a patient care organization, we're a research organization. So, we work very hard at our messaging to articulate and present the lives that are impacted by our research, the people who are surviving and thriving, the metastatic patients who are living years, which was not the case not that long ago. People are living through not just localized breast cancer but metastatic breast cancer.

[00:12:22]

But an organization like ours has to put the patient face there in order to raise funds. We can't just talk about labs and test tubes, it's not what we do. And I will tell you that the cohort of researchers we fund around the globe are so committed, so dedicated, so ardently focused on finding a cure that it is incredibly inspiring. Shawn, I hope I have a chance to introduce some to you because these are truly extraordinary individuals who see the value in science and mine it for all it's worth to save lives.

[00:13:07]

**Michael:** Yes, it's a "yes, and...", isn't it? It's a passionate about science and passionate about human. That doesn't have to be mutually exclusive. It's like the epitome of people-first organizations, right?

[00:13:18]

**Myra:** That's right, that's right.

[00:13:20]

**Michael:** That across industries, if we were more people-first, what could that look like?

[00:13:24]

**Myra:** Right. This isn't science for science's sake, this isn't science to create a textbook, this is science to impact lives today.

[00:13:34]

**Shawn:** I just love how you just said that Myra, that, you know, it's just not science for science's sake. You know, I'm even sitting here looking at your website from the last, you know, symposium and awards luncheon with all these scientists, all these researchers on the stage with you, these are all people that are committed to the human race and to this cause, to hopefully, to bring it to an end at some point, right? That's what's so powerful.

[00:14:02]

**Myra:** Right. These are true, passionate, dedicated, caring human beings who are pushing the envelope in terms of every avenue of opportunity. One of the hallmarks of BCRF is that we fund what we call high-risk, high-reward science. And when I say risk, I don't mean anyone's life is at risk, I mean that we are funding early-stage speculative stuff, and not everything will hit the mark, but, by George, when our funding can run an idea up the flagpole and it does show promise, we might cut decades off bringing therapy to patients. So, we are flexible with our funding, we are open. You know, the federal government intervenes, comes into the process when a researcher almost has all of their data done. We put resources in the hands of researchers earlier in the process to bring stuff forward. And that niche is a very important niche, and it's what's produced the felicitous results I highlighted.

[00:15:07]

**Shawn:** So, Myra, can we dig into that just a little more around that niche and this risk because, you're the CEO, you're the director, you are in charge of handling a great deal of money and stewardship of that money. But you have really leaned in. And I remember the first time I met you sitting in the office in New York, you have really leaned in and your whole team has, into this risk piece, you know, finding those small researchers who might have that big idea in some, you know, small country or small area. Can you really talk about that? Because, as a leader, when you look at companies, typically, those CEOs, those top leaders, very few of them are willing to go take that risk, but your saying, what I'm hearing you say is, "We have to take that risk for that high reward or we're never going to get rid of this or even leapfrog in this whole thing around breast cancer."

[00:16:10]

**Myra:** I'm really just a good fundraiser. But my partner in this process is a scientific advisory body that is comprised of the world's leading lights in breast cancer. They are the experts and they scour the world for the most promising ideas. We don't issue an RFP, or request for proposal, we invite scientists to submit their proposals. Our scientific advisory board has its

finger on the pulse of every innovation and every innovator. They really know who is out there, they're at every scientific meeting, they're reading every scientific paper. And when we have additional funds each year to add more grants, we look at that, they look and say, "What are we not funding presently that's beginning to show high promise? Where are the opportunities?" And they then say, "Okay, who's seen something? Who's got early data? Where is the opportunity and high promise that our dollars can move something forward?"

[00:17:10]

So, as I say, they are my partners. I'm not a scientist, but I have behind me this group of highly-skilled, well-connected, brilliant minds who can invite proposals, and look at the ideas, and say, "You know, what? This is one where our dollars can move something forward because, by George, if this hunch is right, it's a game-changer." So, we fill that niche by identifying seminal novel approaches that might never gain traction if not for our investment. And we do feel we've been able to cut decades off getting therapy to patients because our approach to funding is so novel.

[00:17:54]

**Shawn:** Yeah. I mean, your approach is truly disruptive. Like you said, you don't put RFPs out, you allow people to submit, and then you look at it on a one-on-one basis if you feel like it can really move that far ahead, and there's risk in that.

[00:18:14]

**Myra:** The risk is that it might not work. But you know what, Shawn? If you don't throw it up and see what lands and what sticks, you can't make progress. And we recognize the nature of science. And the other thing that we do is, most funding agencies, if you fund something and then the path forward, the project doesn't play out as was envisioned, the project stops. We have investigators say to us, "You know what? The idea I had isn't going to bear fruit, but if I could take a left turn here, I have an idea of what will work," and we say, "Do it. Go."

[00:18:50]

**Shawn:** Yes. What I hear there, Myra...and my mind's spinning in business terms. We talked about this a lot in our consulting side of our business, in MOFI, that, you know, it's okay to fail, take those learnings, make the turns you need to make, and go forward. But that's really hard, and I commend you as the leader of this organization and your scientific advisory board, that you look at that and, you know, you don't scold that researcher, you say, "Great, take those learnings, take that left turn, take that right turn, and go forward. We still need this."

[00:19:27]

**Myra:** Yeah. And we know we are funding the most talented global brain trust. Our dollars over the years, we've had two Nobel Laureates emerge out of our researchers, and we really feel very gratified that the yield of our investment has been dramatic. And we're not done. You know, still, every two minutes, a woman in the U.S. is diagnosed with breast cancer. One in eight in the U.S. will develop invasive breast cancer in her lifetime. So, our job is not done. You



know, we hope that people have not taken their eye off the prize of putting breast cancer out of business with COVID. But people understand the key to a healthy future is research and science.

[00:20:18]

**Shawn:** Yeah. That's so powerful and inspiring. One last question for you here, Myra, is, as breast cancer awareness and survivorship has increased, which huge applause and dances for that right, the survivor community has grown. So, what would you say to breast cancer survivors, and patients, and anyone else, around supporting bold research in new ways? What would be your one ask of that community, and even of our listeners, to say, "Here's where we need you." And I know it's money, but I know it's more than that. What would you say to them, Myra?

[00:20:59]

**Myra:** Well, you know, the survivor community is very proactive, and it is indeed a community in the true sense of the word. If you go on our website, [www.bcrf.org](http://www.bcrf.org), you'll see the many ways you can support us. We have north of 100 corporate partners who bring products to market with a portion of the proceeds from their sale that return to BCRF. Wonderful partners. You'll see those on our website. You can donate online. You can look at our event calendar and join an event. You can create your own custom fundraising page on our website and tap into your own network. You can include us in your planned giving strategy. Put us in the will. Spread the message. Find us on social media. There are so many people alive today who've gone through it. Tell your story, highlight the fact that the advances that made you a survivor derived from science, research is the reason, and BCRF is the largest global engine fueling research. It's a straight line.

[00:22:09]

**Shawn:** Awesome. And, you know, my wife, Carla, and I, and our organization, MOFI, are so proud to stand beside you and to share that vision to have a world without breast cancer. And so, you know, we've partnered alongside with you guys, and it's just an honor.

[00:22:29]

**Myra:** Thank you. And, you know, Shawn, we're distinct in that we have a laser-sharp focus on funding research. We don't do anything else. And that singular focus has stood the test of time for us.

[00:22:40]

**Shawn:** Yep, it's powerful. Well, Myra, we've come to this part in the podcast known as the combustion questions. (Myra laughs) You talked about science, and this has all been about science, and I love it. I tell our listeners that we have this amazing algorithm that pulls these three randomly selected questions and that pulls it right out of Michael's brain onto the paper. So, I'm gonna turn this over to Michael to ask you your combustion questions, Myra.

[00:23:13]

**Myra:** Oh, God. (Myra laughing)

[00:23:14]

**Michael:** All right, Myra, are you ready for your combustion questions?

**Myra:** I am, I am.

[00:23:19]

**Michael:** Okay. Number one. If time and money were no object at all, what hobby would you take up that you could spend as much time or money on as you want?

[00:23:29]

**Myra:** Boy, oh boy. You know, I have to say, I so love what I do, I would do everything I could to assure BCRF's long-term future. We gotta build endowment, we gotta build a strong planned giving program. I know you're looking for hobbies outside of what I do, but BCRF is my life. I have to say I'm an oddball and that I'm a person with a focus that is 24/7 on what I do every day.

[00:24:00]

**Michael:** Well, if hobbies are about passions and putting your skills to work in meaningful ways, I'd say that counts.

**Shawn:** That's right.

**Michael:** Okay. Question number two. What is your go-to comfort food? And you get extra points if it's from a fast-food restaurant.

**Myra:** (Myra laughs), Ice cream.

**Michael:** What flavor?

**Myra:** Mint chip.

**Michael:** From anywhere in particular?

**Myra:** Right out of the container, right out of the freezer when I'm in my PJs.

**Shawn:** (Shawn and Michael both laughing), I love that. Love that, Myra.

**Michael:** One big spoon, that's all you need.

**Myra:** And when I'm sitting on the couch, watching TV, with a container in hand. And I look good in green, so mint chip is [crosstalk 00:24:45].

**Shawn:** Beautiful.

**Michael:** I love that, I love that. Okay, question number three. What do you think about pine-cones?

**Myra:** What do I think about pine-cones?

**Michael:** Yeah.

[00:24:54]

**Myra:** I just collected a bunch, before the spring came, with my grandchildren, filling a basket with pumpkins and pine-cones for a centerpiece for an early spring dinner. So, I love them, I think they're charming. And we scoured the property. And I think they're quite cool. And they peel back layers just like science.

**Michael:** There you go. Beautiful.

[00:25:22]

**Shawn:** Love it. Well, Myra, thank you so much. We are so honored to have you with us and to share the Breast Cancer Research Foundation story. Again, stay safe, be well. And I can't wait till I can see you again in New York City.

[00:25:35]

**Myra:** Me too. Well, you in your sweat shorts, me in my sweatpants, we'll be together again soon.

[00:25:41]

**Shawn:** That's right. All right, Myra. Thanks.

[00:25:44]

**Michael:** Thank you.

[00:25:45]

**Myra:** Thanks so very much.

**Shawn:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of "The Combustion Chronicles." None of this is possible without you the listener. If you'd like to keep the conversation going, look up Man on Fire on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and at manonfire.co. Give us a shout. Let us know what you think. And please, subscribe, rate, and review if you like what we're doing and if you don't do it anyways. And remember, always stay safe and be well.