Elizabeth and Cate Edwards during a 2004 campaign fund-raiser for John Edwards at New York's Radio City Music Hall.

LIFE LESSONS

elizabeth & cate edwards

Mother and daughter talk candidly about family, vows, and weddings

It's been three years since Elizabeth Edwards—wife, mother, lawyer, political campaigner, and health activist—was diagnosed with breast cancer. Since then, she and her daughter Cate, 25, a Harvard Law School student, have focused much of their attention on spreading the message that every woman can help fight this disease. We sat in on a recent conversation.

ON FINDING A CURE >> Cate: There have been such great medical developments in recent years, so more and more women we know are actually living with breast cancer. I can't even count the number of friends who, when they found out about you, confided that their moms have breast cancer, too. When it strikes in the family, you gain an automatic awareness and realize there are things we can be doing by raising money. Elizabeth: We are on the verge of a cure. So if you walk in one of these breast-cancer walks or participate in events that raise money for research, you realize you have the capacity to do something about it. Cate: And monthly breast checks—I was finally able to tell my gynecologist that I do them now. I also send information to everyone I know.

ON SHARING WISDOM >> Elizabeth: I've been writing a letter [to her children] that you will read after I die, ever since you were in elementary school. Cate: I always say, "Mom, what's in that letter?" Elizabeth: And I always say, "No—you can't read it now!" In the letter, I talk about your wedding a little... how to choose the right man to marry. We've gone to very nice weddings in very fancy places, but we think a setting that embraces home is the most apt location. On our property [in North Carolina] there are wonderful places—two ponds, and a meadow where I intend to plant wildflowers.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF VOWS >> Elizabeth: One of my strongest memories of my wedding was our vows, how we wanted to commit our lives and our marriage to our community and to improving the lives of others. If you are careful and thoughtful about your vows, they really can become a map for your marriage. Cate: The respect and admiration that [you and dad] have for each other, your shared goals and moral ideals, and your intellectual companionship have all made your marriage work and kept it interesting. Those are things I want for my marriage as well. But it's not just the big things—it's also the subtle affection you show one another when you don't think anyone is looking, the way you make fun of each other and flirt like you're in high school. And your pleasure in things like boat rides and college basketball. The little things, although just decorative ornaments of a marriage, certainly make the idea of a lifelong commitment more attractive.

ON SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF >> Elizabeth: We've shared campaigning, and Wade's death [the Edwardses' son was killed in a car accident in 1996], and breast cancer. All of those things put a wedding in perspective. We've seen several of your friends get married and watched intense situations between mothers and daughters who believe it's the most important day of their life. I look back at the details that might have ruffled me at my own wedding—no air conditioning, the church vacuum cleaner being stolen. It's important to remember that those are trivial. Every moment you live is a joyful day—not just your wedding day. Cate: I think—and hope—that when I get married, my life experiences will lend me perspective. We have had many rehearsals for tough, stressful times. And I think that will help us.