

Swede mom fights cancer, learns what's important in life

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Paula Abramson tells of inspirational journey.

Paula Abramson could be a poster mom for Swede sports.

So when the mother of two Gothenburg High School athletes first experienced back pain at age 43, she didn't let it slow her down.

Son Aaron played football and daughter Ali was on the softball field in October of 2008 so she and husband Tom attended games often four nights a week.

As the pain worsened, she tried massage and visited a chiropractor. Magnetic resonance imaging and X-rays didn't reveal anything abnormal.

But because of terrible discomfort on a cold night in January of 2009, Paula didn't attend her children's varsity basketball games.

Alone in her home, Paula reached a point where she couldn't move or breathe but waited until her family returned home before asking for an ambulance.

She was transported to Gothenburg Memorial Hospital where she was given pain medication and later taken to Good Samaritan Hospital in Kearney.

There they discovered vertebrae compressed in three places because of holes in her spine

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caused by cancer.

The bad news kept coming.

Paula was sent to Lincoln's BryanLGH Medical Center to find out where the cancer had originated.

A mammogram in April of 2008 and a chest X-ray six months later had not shown a one-centimeter mass in her right breast doctors discovered in Lincoln.

The diagnosis was stage IV metastatic breast cancer that had spread to her bones, Paula said, of which there is no cure.

"I was frustrated because I had done everything right," she said about the diagnosis. "I didn't smoke or drink and I exercised regularly and got regular checkups and mammograms.

"There was no family history of cancer."

Paula also felt cheated from seeing her children graduate from high school and college and get married.

At first, she said she was given little hope of survival.

"When I asked the oncologist my prognosis, she said two years," Paula said. "I said to myself, 'No way.' "

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She and her family received some good news—that although the cancer was aggressive, it usually responded to treatment.

After a week in the hospital, Paula returned home where she took morphine for pain and a chemotherapy pill.

Though she had laid on her back for a week in the hospital and slept much of the time at home, Paula still managed to get to Swede basketball games where Ali and Aaron played guard on their teams.

“I didn’t want to miss one,” she said.



Because Paula had lost muscle while lying on her back for a week, she said it was humbling to return home with a walker.

“I couldn’t go downstairs to do laundry until May,” she said.

Friends bought her a stadium chair and carried her to her seat in the gymnasium.

They also provided meals for the family for three months as well as books, DVDs, gift cards and more.

The Abramson’s oldest daughter Ashley took a semester leave from the University of

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Nebraska-Lincoln to care for her mother and family.

Other primary caregivers were Tom and Paula's sister Sandy Nicklasson of Kearney.

"I cried a lot at first. It was hard to accept because we're very strong women," she said about her daughters and female relatives.

Following her diagnosis, Paula said she missed a game in which Aaron and his teammates wore hearts on their shoes that said "Mom."

"I live for my kids," she said.

Eventually Paula weaned herself from morphine and now takes pain medication only at night.

She is also on a breast-cancer-fighting drug Tamoxifen and coumadin—a blood thinner—to help prevent blood clots.

Chemotherapy caused Paula to lose half her hair but she's accepted what she calls "a new kind of normal" based on a book about life and how it changes.

"I live each day as it comes. It is what it is and there's nothing I could have done to prevent cancer," she explained. "It's my new normal."

These days, she walks to the Wellness Center where she undergoes light workouts and physical therapy. Paula also takes an intravenous bone building/strengthening drug monthly to build up her bones.

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She had monthly radiation treatments in Kearney and now sees her oncologist every three months.

After the last blood check, her cancer cells were in a normal range.

“The oncologist didn’t expect me to rebound so fast,” Paula said. “She couldn’t believe how well I was doing.”

During the past year, she’s learned not to take health and life for granted, is grateful for friends and community support and knows that a positive spirit has a lot to do with recovery.

“Prayer is also important,” Paula said. “At first, people came over to pray for me and everywhere I went, they told me I was on their prayer chain.”

Cancer has changed her life in a positive way.

“It’s a lot more precious,” Paula said, remembering how she felt at Ali’s softball games this fall. “I enjoyed them even more. I’m thankful I was able to watch her play.”

Most of all, Paula feels fortunate to have such a strong, loving family.

“Some people feel sorry for me but I’ve gotten so much in life already,” she said. “I feel blessed with what God has given me even if I have to deal with cancer.”

Paula said her cancer is nothing compared to what some people face like her two best high school friends who each lost a child.

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"Everyone has their burdens," she said.

On Oct. 4, about a year after Paula first felt symptoms of cancer, she lined up to begin the Susan Komen Race for the Cure in Omaha along with more than 10,000 people.

Ashley and Ali had organized a team in honor of their mother and two grandmothers who have battled breast cancer.

The TaTa-Tastic team, made up of family and friends, raised more than \$500 while Nebraskans raised \$185,560 for local programs that focus on fighting breast cancer.

Paula's daughters stood on either side of their mother who was clad in a light-pink shirt like other cancer survivors.

"I told them I'd wait at the finish line but they made me do it," she said.

"I never wanted to be a poster child for breast cancer but my daughters kind of pushed me out there."

Surrounded by other cancer survivors, Paula said she felt energized and comforted that that many people were together for same thing.

"It was awesome."

WHAT HER CHILDREN HAVE LEARNED FROM CANCER

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Ashley Abramson, a senior at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln:

“When someone in your family is seriously ill, you tend to start looking at the bigger picture in life and realize what is really important. I’ve had friends go through similar incidents and it just makes me understand how they or anyone dealing with cancer feels.

Seeing my mom battle what she has makes me so thankful for every day and appreciative of everyone in my life. The hardest thing for me was seeing her in pain and not having any power over fixing it.

While she was in the hospital, I wrote everything down the doctors said, questioned them over and over again just so I was able to fully understand what was going on. If I couldn’t do anything to help the pain, I was going to be able to research and understand what was happening to her and what the next steps were.

I asked the doctors every day to send up the physical therapists, knowing that the sooner she started, the sooner she could get back to living life like she was before.

Mom was active in so many aspects of all of our lives and to have her taken out of that was also hard. I tried to step in and help out but found out that I wasn’t prepared to do half the things that she did every day so it gave me a sense of the “invisible” work that parents do every day.

I’m so very thankful for all the support we’ve seen from friends, family, and the community—we’re truly blessed by each and every person who helped us out during that time and sent prayers and thoughts our way. I’m a firm believer in prayer and I can say that I’ve seen prayer work in my mom and strengthening her in this time.

Mom’s illness has also helped me to become a more active fund raiser and advocate for cancer research. Doing events such as the Susan Komen 5K or Relay for Life have become really important to me.“

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Aaron Abramson, a freshman at Southeast Community College:

“Going through the diagnosis and recovery, I learned to be strong when everything is telling you the worse possible situation.

I always knew my mother was one of the strongest persons I have known and that whole situation just proves it. It changed me a lot. Growing up I never thought anything like that would happen to me and my family but when it did it was just too real.

It just shows that nothing is promised to anyone. You have to love and enjoy it while it's there for you.”

Ali Abramson, a Gothenburg High School senior:

“It has been life changing.”

Ali has organized a couple of breast-cancer donation events at school.