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Running helps woman cope with cancer

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BY AMANDA CREASEY ON NOVEMBER 6, 2018

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ABOVE: Lauran Johnson, left, and Sue Moss are pictured after completing a half marathon in Charleston, S.C.

When she isn't busy teaching math at a local community college, Lauran Johnson can usually be found pounding the pavement in Chester or Richmond.

The math instructor has completed half marathons (13.1 miles) not only in Richmond, but also in Key West, Fla., and Charleston and Myrtle Beach, S.C.

She started running about a decade ago when her cholesterol, sugar and blood pressure levels were creeping upward, and she wanted to improve her health.

"My first race was the Monument Avenue 10K in Richmond. I did the 10k training team and was well prepared," she said. After that race, Johnson knew she would continue running for enjoyment. "I remember feeling overwhelmed with accomplishment at the end. I think some people walked it faster than I ran it, but I completed it and felt great."

Just a few years into her running habit and in seemingly exceptional health, Johnson was diagnosed with cancer.

"I did not have any symptoms," she said. "Actually, I felt great. My cancer was found during my annual mammogram."

The results of her mammogram necessitated a biopsy.

"When I went in for the results, I already knew. It was just a feeling I had," Johnson said. "Still, I remember sitting there, stoic, as the doctor's words echoed inside of my head: 'You have cancer.'"

Just 18 months prior to her diagnosis, Johnson's mother had been diagnosed with the disease. Because she was her mother's primary caretaker, she knew firsthand what her immediate future would entail. "That evening, I just wanted to be alone," Johnson said. "I needed to process the life-changing information I had just received. I needed a nice, long, slow run."

Johnson's initial surgery lasted four hours, and within 24 hours, she was heading home. "It was a hard ride. I felt every tiny bump in the road," she said.

Despite discomfort, Johnson knew she had to keep moving.

"The next day, I went for a short walk around my driveway and home and then took a two-hour nap. Recovery was exhausting," she said. Although she was tired, after several days she was walking all over Chester with her friends. "I missed minimal time at work, which was my choice, as I was given the option to take off several months," she said. In hindsight, Johnson admits she pushed her limits, but was anxious to get back to normal and move on with her life.

Roughly six weeks after surgery, Johnson's oncologist prescribed an oral chemotherapy drug.

"It was brutal. The side effects were unbearable: nausea, headaches and extreme fatigue. After about a year on the drug, I seriously considered not taking it anymore as it greatly affected my quality of life," she said.

Johnson learned from her oncologist that no other options existed for her treatment. If she wanted to prevent the cancer from returning, she had no choice but to continue with the medication.

She was unwilling to accept several more years of physical pain and illness.

"I took it upon myself to research the medication to see if there was something else I could do," she said. In this way, Johnson learned she could safely take half of a pill in the morning and the other half at night. After about two weeks, she was a new person. "All of the side effects had diminished," she said. Her oncologist agreed that her new medication schedule was effective and acceptable, "which is a good thing," Johnson said, "since I am still taking the drug and will be for another three years."

Aside from the challenges of treatment, she said the hardest part “was the realization that I may not be there to see my children reach their goals and aspirations in life.”

At the time of her diagnosis, Johnson's older son was entering his third year of college, and her younger son was about to enter his senior year of high school.

“Several of my close friends agreed to take on different ‘mom’ jobs, just in case I couldn’t be there,” Johnson said. “Wanting to be there to see my sons develop into the amazing men they are today was the main drive that made me determined to fight and fight hard. Running kept me going, kept me sane, kept me healthy, kept me grounded in reality.”

Last month, about seven and a half years after her cancer diagnosis, Johnson completed the Myrtle Beach Half Marathon with several running buddies.

“The weather was perfect, except for the wind, and the route was beautiful,” she said. “I ran 13.1 miles in 2:05, my best time ever for a half [marathon].”

In addition to setting a personal record, Johnson achieved a negative split, which occurs when a runner completes the second half of a race faster than the first half. “I felt great,” Johnson said. “Running makes me stronger in all aspects of my life. I am a physically and mentally stronger person because of running.”

She uses long runs to think things over. A bonus is the friendships formed.

“Runners are the friendliest, most supportive people out there,” she said. “We have a common unbreakable bond. I love my family of runners.” She added that her running buddies are there for each other through all of the ups and downs of life.

Fitting running into her busy life is a challenge, she said, but in the end, she always feels the same: invigorated and ready to take on the world.

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DEBORAH GOULD on NOVEMBER 16, 2018 6:34 PM · EDIT

Very good story... inspiring

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