



Getting fit, beating cancer

Kickboxers help graduate battling her second cancer

Clarissa Leon

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Tanya James doesn't normally take time off work. But on Aug. 9 she got someone to cover her kickboxing class at Lombardi Recreation Center and left to shop at Wal-Mart.

Her timing seemed to be a sign, she said, as only 20 minutes into her visit she found herself face to face with one of her students, who also decided to skip class that day.

James would usually never see nutrition professor Karon Felten other than in class.

But this time, meeting up with Felten, or "Mom" as she would call her, led her to organize Lombardi's first workout fund-raiser this Thursday for Kayla Nebeker, a 23-year-old University of Nevada, Reno graduate who was diagnosed with Glioblastoma multiform (GBM), the most aggressive type of brain cancer.

James said Felten explained to her that Nebeker was someone who she could "not let off her mind or her heart."

"You get the diagnosis and you hope for the best," Felten said. "It was just overwhelming and it was at that point I told myself I'm going to do everything I can."

For James, her response was immediate.

"I saw Karon's face and how upset she was," James said. "I thought, 'I'm the Wellness Coordinator now and I'm going to do something.'"

The end result of their conversation was a workout fund-raiser this Thursday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at Lombardi Recreation Center. Students, faculty, staff and the public are invited to attend Lombardi's first "Work-out-a-thon" for Nebeker.

Those attending will pay \$5, more if they can, and will be able to take yoga, Pilates or a kickboxing class upstairs.

The money raised will help pay Nebeker's hospital costs.

While this time she needs to worry about hospital bills, the fight is nothing new for Nebeker, who survived stage-three colon cancer four years ago, after nearly a year of misdiagnoses.

"Now that I've been diagnosed with brain cancer I guess it makes me feel like cancer is a very real big part of my life now," Nebeker said about having cancer again. "Before, I probably wasn't affected by it the way I am now. This time there is so much unknown, it's scary, there's a lot of fear in the unknown. And your imagination is left to fill out the pieces."

When she was first diagnosed with cancer, her doctor didn't suspect she would have any bleeding polyps, which are lumps of tissue that lead to cancer, but it turned out she did.

"He said 'Well, the last thing it could be is a bleeding polyp, but usually it can be colitis or diaticultis, or maybe, and I really don't think this is it ... and that's what it turned out to be," she said.

It's highly unusual for someone at the age of 19 to have colon cancer, Nebeker said. Typically it occurs in someone over the age of 50, she said.

At the age of 19 she sported a chemotherapy fanny pack to class that would administer her chemotherapy throughout the day via pumps in her system.

Eventually, while recovering from surgery, she missed out on her finals and later dropped her classes that semester. She lost her Millennium Scholarship and resumed classes the following semester.

Last December she graduated with a bachelor's in nutrition and a minor in gerontology.

She began working at Washoe Medical Center and in the university gerontology office for about 55 to 60 hours a week.

She already had made plans to attend graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles where she would be interning and also receiving health insurance.

But a gap of two months from the time she would leave UNR to attending UCLA left her without health insurance.

Then the unthinkable happened.

One day, while working at Washoe Medical Center, her left side went numb.

Moments later, her hand clutched tight and she fell back into a co-worker's arm and had a seizure.

For about a month before, Nebeker said, she experienced headaches at work, something she considered normal considering the stress she was in. But, she didn't think it would be brain cancer, let alone GBM.

On July 22, the hospital did a craniotomy and found her tumor, Nebeker said. But her surgery on July 27 found that Nebeker's tumor was inoperable.

When she was rushed to the emergency room, Nebeker pleaded for them to take her out of ER because she did not have insurance.

Trying to pay for the first month of chemotherapy left her \$5,000 short.

"When it comes down to it I was diagnosed a month ago and I have doctors who tell me 'You have to have surgery in a week, you have to start treatments next week, you can't wait two weeks,'" Nebeker said. "It's really scary because I can't get treated because I don't have the insurance together. So they tell me these things but it's a matter of bureaucracy."

GBM multiform is the most "aggressive" type of brain cancer, which means, you'll die faster, Nebeker said.

Although doctors say patients have a survival rate of six months to a year, Nebeker said she has found otherwise on YASG.com (Young Adults Surviving Glioblastoma), a Web site devoted to younger patients with GBM that allows them to post blogs, learn about each other's stories and make new friends.

Some patients lived for an additional 18 years, Nebeker said, who before couldn't find a positive outlook on GBM.

"Before (I found the Web site) I felt completely out of control, I felt like Alice in Wonderland," Nebeker said. "Every emotion just comes at once. You don't have the time to deal with 'You're angry,' you don't have time to deal with 'You're sad,' or 'You are scared.' "

But fund-raisers such as Lombardi's workout day are helping Nebeker so she doesn't have to worry about money and can focus on getting better.

For James, the fund-raiser for Lombardi is just her way of helping out a "fellow human being," she said.

Students should come on Thursday to become familiar with the gym and its wellness program, James said.

"It's time to rally around somebody who I really admire not because you do things to get back, but because it's good to do," James said.

For Felten, she's already set up the "Love Trust for Kayla" trust fund at First Independent Bank of Nevada on Kietzke Lane for anyone interested in donating.

Other fund-raisers Felten has helped organize will take place later on in the month, including a "Party Light" party in the Jot Travis Student Union where students can buy candles and accessories as well as a dinner auction.

"We don't have to be helpless in the world," Felten said. "Sometimes we do feel that we can make a difference. That's the one thing I've learned."

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