Article Series Inspirational Stories Breast

Sachi’s story: Facing another unpredictable wave

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[Sachi] When my mom had cancer, we never talked about it at all.

[soft, peaceful music]

When my mom was 45, I was 15 years old and a sophomore in high school. She was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer.

So in my junior year, when I was 19, she passed away.

She was very adamant about me not stopping to slow down my life for her.

She wanted me to just keep going.

I have this gene, and at the exact same time it made a tumor in my mom, it's making a tumor in me. [sniffling]

I decided to have a double mastectomy and a total hysterectomy.

[Sachi's Daughter] Oooh, ooh, ooh! Watch this, Mommy.

[Sachi] Okay, Nam.

I had Nami three weeks before my 40th birthday. She swims, she dives, she does it all.

She's four and a half, and she loves the water as much as I do, I think.

It was really important for me to be very open about it with my friends and strangers.

We just treated it more like a chronic illness. That's what's amazing about cancer these days is that you can survive.

The ocean has been a major part of my treatment. It's just raw and wild out there.

All you know is that what comes next might kill you, but you learn how to keep your mind and body calm in those situations, and you turn it into something magic and beautiful.

I think that's how I've tried to approach this diagnosis. That is the real gift of cancer.

And if you can survive it, life is just so much more beautiful.

I have this gene that has been killing my family for generations and generations.

[Event Host] Those of you who don't know Sachi, she's many things.

She's a photographer, journalist, filmmaker, and she'll talk a little bit about her cancer journey this year and other stuff.

So it is my pleasure to introduce Sachi Cunningham. [crowd clapping]

[Sachi] Okay, hi everyone. I wanted to normalize it. Everyone's been touched by cancer in some way, I think.

I lost my mom. My mom lost her dad. I don't know how far back there's been death at a young age, which means a kid suffering.

I feel very fortunate to be this first generation that is living. It could have been a whole lot worse. And Nami could be without a mother.

I would like Nami to also have the experience of feeling at home in the ocean, and joy in the ocean and me.

Yesterday, we were diving under the waves together, but holding on to each other, and so I know I was giving her that added security.

And I'd like it to be a memory that she holds onto and can draw from when she's in the water.

Nami means ""wave"" in Japanese. She's my lifelong wave.

[peaceful, inspiring music]

SACHI C.
LIVING WITH CANCER SINCE 2016

Sachi looks at her young daughter. And the young girl stares delightedly back at her mama. There is a sparkle in both of their eyes as they connect. For Sachi, this is a role reversal: she was once the daughter looking into her own mother's eyes. And it was her mother who had cancer. Now it's Sachi's turn.

> I feel so fortunate to be born at a time when I could detect this and do something about it.

Sachi's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 30 and had a radical mastectomy. At age 45, her mother was then diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer and passed away four years later, at 49. Her mother's cancer experience made Sachi a candidate for a free high-risk hereditary genetic testing program. She tested positive for the BRCA1 gene. This is a gene mutation that increases the risk of several types of cancer. But Sachi was determined to rewrite her own family history and not repeat her mother's experience.

Sachi made the decision to get a double mastectomy and total hysterectomy in 2016. During the hysterectomy, her doctors discovered a tumor in her fallopian tube. She then underwent 6 rounds of chemo to eliminate any remaining cancer found in her body. It was a hard time both physically and emotionally, as it brought up painful memories of her mother's diagnosis. But Sachi also resolved to use those experiences to make decisions around her care and treatment. From the very beginning, Sachi decided to be vocal about her cancer in a way her mother wasn't.

> That was the big thing that was missing when my mom had cancer. We never talked about it at all. We didn't talk about any feelings associated with it or anything. So it was really important for me to be very open about

it.

Article slides



Sachi prepares for her final surgery.



Sachi stretches at her morning fitness class.



Sachi and her daughter, Nami, get ready for the day.



Sachi and her father, Tim.



Sachi puts on her fins before getting in the water.



Sachi swims at the beach across the street from her home in San Francisco.



A photograph of Sachi as a baby with her mother.



Sachi carries Nami into the ocean in Panama.



Sachi and Nami play in the ocean in Panama.

Another force in her life also prepared Sachi for her journey with cancer. You see, Sachi is a big wave water photographer, and she believes that years of facing massive waves prepared her for this journey. The ocean has always been a major part of Sachi's life. During treatments, water was key to her healing, allowing her to connect with herself in a place she's always felt comfortable. The courage she learned in the waves helped her stay calm and focused throughout her journey, even during chemo treatments.

> Swimming in big waves is about not knowing what's going to come next, only knowing that what comes might kill you. But you keep yourself, your mind and body calm in that situation, and you turn it into something beautiful and magical.

Her experiences with unpredictable waves and cancer treatments taught her that she can do anything. That includes navigating her own healthcare. In the water, Sachi learned it's possible to head straight into the unknown and come out on the other side. And she has determined to do the same with cancer.

Sachi is incredibly open about her experiences with cancer and the fact that she wants to live with cancer differently than some. She is determined to be vocal and to keep doing the things that brought her incredible comfort before her diagnosis.

> I want to normalize it. You know, everyone's been touched by cancer in some way.