



Two-time cancer survivor is 'always looking forward'

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By

Armed with an old-fashioned glass cutter and diamond head, cancer survivor Vikki Sabo scores a small, colored piece of glass out of a larger pane, fusing it to another diminutive piece of glass.

Sabo, a Brunswick resident and an employee at RPM International in Medina, knows about stained glass windows, the way diverse glass pieces can be fused together under the heat of soldering and then be polished, forming a breath-taking amalgam of art.

Her life has resembled stained glass.

As a student at Brunswick High School and the Medina County Career Center in the mid-1980s, Sabo, who was 16 at the time, began to lose weight at a high rate, leaving physicians baffled by the drastic change. Doctor after doctor examined her, but none could pinpoint the direct cause of her weight loss.

It must be nothing out of the ordinary, they said, a teenage girl trying to reduce her weight to impress her peers.

It remained nothing until Sabo's mom, Sharon, began to push for more answers.

Finally, an oncologist delivered the diagnosis: Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph nodes.

"I think I was more annoyed that I was going to lose my hair," said Sabo, who was worried what her



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Jeff Ivey/Special to Sun News

Vikki Sabo mans the phones while volunteering at the front desk of The Gathering Place West in Westlake. The Brunswick resident is a survivor of two bouts with Hodgkin's lymphoma -16 years apart.

boyfriend would think. "It never really hit me to hear the word cancer at that point in my life."

Her family, on the other hand, was devastated but prepared for the fight. The soldering iron was being laid to her family's edges.

Tumors lined her lymph nodes and spleen, so doctors surgically removed the affected areas, and Sabo also endured a bone marrow test – well known as an excruciatingly painful process. Her oncologists tested her bone marrow pain-free and found no traces of cancer in the fatty substance in her bone cavity.

For the next month and half, Sabo underwent rigorous radiation treatments.

Each day, Sabo's father, Richard, would drop Sharon off at work in Middleburg Heights and then head for his own job so that Vikki could drive her mother's car to school at the Career Center. Halfway through the school day, Vikki would leave and drive north to Middleburg Heights to pick up her mom, and then head to downtown Cleveland for radiation.

After six and a half weeks, the word came in.

"They never use the word cure," she said. "It's only in remission."

But remission was good. Remission meant her hair could grow back. Remission meant she could be a teenager again – have boyfriends, go to dances, and dream. Life could resume as normal.

Over the summer, Sabo caught up on English, Math, and Social Studies courses in preparation for the next year.

Over the next decade, Sabo married her husband, Elmer, and had a daughter, Sarah.

But remission is not always permanent. Sabo's lasted for 16 years.

At 32, Sabo was in the prime of her life, but the cancer struck suddenly and unexpectedly.

One weekend, she attended her brother's wedding, but by the next weekend, she could not shake the intense pain radiating from her shoulder blade. In haste, Sabo went to the emergency room where doctors diagnosed her with pneumonia.

The ER doctors decided to admit her and keep her overnight, with another CAT scan scheduled in the morning.

Cancer never crossed her mind. She had no symptoms of a cancer patient – no unexpected weight loss, no extensive fatigue.

But after the second CAT scan, an oncologist came into her room and sat down. As he opened his lips to speak, the words pierced deep. Her remission had deserted her. Her Hodgkin's Disease had returned.

"That time it hit, and it hit hard," she said. "I was in shock that it would come back."

Doctors had found several small masses along her lungs.

As the soldering iron was once again laid to her family's stained glass window of life, fears began to creep into her soul: *Can they get it this time? What if my family and my daughter have to watch me suffer through this? What if they cannot stop it?*

With Hodgkin's Disease, if a patient has radiation once, it likely will not be effective again; so doctors suggested that Sabo undergo chemotherapy.

Over the course of three and a half months, Sabo endured 12 treatments of chemotherapy. Once a week, every other week, she would travel to Cleveland Clinic in Warrensville Heights, and absorb, for eight hours, a "cocktail" of four or five medicines, delivered intravenously, with the hopes that it would diminish the cancer.

Just as she had 16 years prior, Sabo's mom sat by her bedside through every session, and the beautiful stained glass window of Sabo's life began to polish up and shine clearly.

"My mom was still my No. 1 rock," Sabo said. "Family is my No. 1. I've learned to trust on them and lean on them."

The first day after each treatment, Sabo would feel normal, but by the second or third day, the chemo would batter her entire body, leaving her muscles and bones hurting so severely that she would nestle under heated blankets or sit in a tub of water just to alleviate the pain even a slight bit.

Again, she lost her hair, but this time, it was no whisker off her head. The night before chemotherapy, one of Sabo's friends would shave her head, and the hair would be donated to Wigs for Kids.

When chemotherapy ended, Sabo underwent another surgery, but doctors found no masses on her lungs, and her blood tests checked out fine.

Her cancer had once again gone into remission.

"You don't look back. You always look forward," said Sabo, who is now 43 and still in remission.

She and her family still mold and design stained glass windows, spending hours upon hours cutting, shaping, soldering, and polishing the glass into a beautiful collage.

"The finished product is always pretty cool," Sabo said of her stained glass projects.

The same could be said of her stained glass life.



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Sabo now volunteers at The Gathering Place, a community-based cancer support center with locations in Beachwood and Westlake. Offering programs free-of-charge, the Gathering Place aims to meet the social, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of families and individuals battling cancer.

She volunteers for special functions, manning the front desk and giving tours of the facility to visitors, hoping to give encouragement to other families and patients battling with cancer.

The Gathering Place, Sabo said, relies heavily on donations and fundraisers to operate.

The Gathering Place will be hosting its 11th annual Race for the Place on Sunday, June 5, at 9 a.m., beginning at Beachwood Place, 26300 Cedar Road, in Beachwood. Registrants can walk or run a 5K or one-mile race to raise money for those affected by cancer.

The day will include face painting, music, games, and other family activities.

In 11 years, the Race for the Place has raised over \$1 million for The Gathering Place.

For more information on The Gathering Place, The Race for the Place, or to sign up for The Race, visit www.touchedbycancer.org/. Individuals and teams can also register by calling The Gathering Place at (216) 595-9546.

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