three powerful stories of survival, inspiration and beating the odds

NOT DEFINED BY *diagnosis*

Fear can define what we do and who we are. When fear is present, we can either choose to avoid what we were going after or battle it head on knowing that an easy road does not lie ahead.

For Teresa Mees, Julie Ryan and Brittany Bailey, fear is not a factor. Even when doctors' diagnoses radically changed their lives, taking the challenging path was the only choice.

BY VICKI HODDER AND KRISTI MCCANN
PHOTOS BY ANTHONY JINSON

teresa mees

The entry Teresa Mees posted to launch her blog bears the title "Rediscovering the Joy in Movement."

"Joy in movement in the moment," Teresa writes in conclusion. "And I hope to be part of that collective voice."

She is. And her voice rings particularly clear because she has what is often considered a wheelchair disease, multiple sclerosis. Teresa, 44, was diagnosed with MS in July 2009, about a year after she and her husband, Jeff, moved to Columbia with their three young boys. Since that diagnosis, Teresa has completed a six-month Polestar Pilates training program and taught the rehabilitation-based exercise course in fitness centers throughout the city. She took a break after undergoing a double mastectomy for breast cancer last October but started teaching again in February.

"No matter what your body's capable of, you have to use it," Teresa says."

Teresa's personal strength has been both the result and a way of coping with a slew of physical challenges she has faced since childhood. Among those challenges was a large congenital tumor Teresa had on her jaw as a child that required two operations to remove, followed by several reconstructive surgeries. Teresa recalls the anguish she felt as a youngster watching the Miss America pageant after someone had teased her about her appearance. "Mom, I'll never be Miss America," she remembers saying. Her parents, however, insisted she could do anything she wanted, and Teresa credits them with teaching her how to deal with physical difficulties by providing a stable foundation based on their refusal to coddle or treat her differently from other children.

Teresa drew upon that stability as she came to realize she has MS. Having dismissed milder symptoms for a while, she couldn't ignore the shooting pains in her face and arms that in 2009 prevented her from writing or speaking clearly, along with the numbness in her feet that made it difficult to stand. The third time Teresa went to the emergency room, tests definitively diagnosed MS. With her parents and in-laws helping care for her 1-, 4- and 7-year-old children, Teresa underwent treatment for an acute MS attack before trying various medications aimed at stabilizing the relapsing-remitting MS with which she was diagnosed.

The medications themselves proved to be a challenge. Along with intense flu-like symptoms that lasted a full day, Teresa says the first weekly medication she tried made her so depressed, she was suicidal.

"People think of MS as being a wheelchair disease, but I think that's not the truth a lot of times with MS," she says. "I think fatigue, depression and pain that people can't see, those are the symptoms of the disease."

Different drugs provided relief. Meanwhile, Teresa turned to physical activity to help both her mind and body feel better. Although at first her numb feet limited her workouts, Teresa was taking yoga and Pilates classes by the fall of 2009. "I had to move," she says.

Teresa was encouraged by her Pilates instructor to consider teaching, and she completed the training and began teaching at all of the Wilson's Fitness Centers in 2010 before switching to Chapel Hill Pilates and Yoga. She also launched a fitness blog, TheMove.MS, for people with MS.

When cancer struck last fall, Teresa took the same active approach. She practiced Pilates between the double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery, and she spoke excitedly about returning to teaching after lifting weights for the first time since cancer struck.

"No matter what life hands you, you can be healthy with your life if you choose to be," Teresa says. "And to share that with the rest of the world, that's why I teach."

julie ryan

Columbia resident Julie Ryan says with pride that her Susan G. Komen Mid-Missouri Race for the Cure team was the top fundraiser in the 2013 annual event. With 77 members, "Julie's Rack Pack" donated more than $6,000 to the fight against breast cancer.

Julie's participation in last fall's Race for the Cure was as significant as it was heartfelt. Julie, 38, was undergoing chemotherapy at the time following a double mastectomy for breast cancer in late July. Walking the 5K Race for the Cure just two days after her third chemotherapy treatment signaled the energy and proactive attitude with which she has battled breast cancer, an attitude that has prompted Julie since her diagnosis to help others understand and prevent the disease.

"I stay focused on my family and stay focused on making sure that other people understand what can happen," says Julie, mother of two children, 7 and 9 years old. "But I'm not going to live scared. I'm not going to, you know, not live life."

Julie hopes to help other women focus on cancer prevention long before they reach the age when traditional guidelines advise regular mammograms. She points out that she found the lump eventually diagnosed as cancer at the age of 35, years before most organizations would recommend a mammogram. Although younger than 40 and with no family history of cancer, Julie had a mammogram and ultrasound in October 2011. She was reassured when the tests showed only normal fibrocystic breast tissue, and she didn't pursue the matter with a surgeon. A mammogram in November 2012 also detected no cancer in her dense breast tissue. Told she didn't need an ultrasound, Julie let the matter rest until additional symptoms — localized pain, dimpling, bumpy tissue — popped up in the spring of 2013. At that point a mammogram, ultrasound and biopsies discovered the cancer.

"I stay focused on my family and stay focused on making sure that other people understand what can happen. But I'm not going to live scared. I'm not going to, you know, not live life." —Julie Ryan

Within that sequence of events, Julie says, are the messages she tries to convey to other women. First, Julie encourages women in their late 20s to mid-40s, who often are not concerned about breast cancer, to take preventive steps. She also tells women that dense breast tissue may mean an ultrasound is required to detect cancer.

And Julie also strives to demonstrate that breast cancer's frightening image can be combatted. "I can't be negative about it, " she says. "If I do, it wastes a whole lot of energy. There are things that are happening constantly in the world of medicine, so who's to say what's going to happen in two or five years that will change how I live the rest of my life?"