

Finding Beauty Through the Battle

With no family history or health problems, 32-year-old Schmalz Elementary teacher Kristin Morris was devastated when she received her diagnosis of stage three aggressive breast cancer

Written by Kristin Morris | Select photography by Sara Isola

I never thought I would hear the words, “You have breast cancer.” In May 2013, I was told just that. I had been diagnosed with stage three aggressive breast cancer, and I couldn’t believe it.

I am only in my 30s, and no one in my family has been diagnosed with it. I had never had a mammogram, and I had always gone in for my well-woman exams. I had no idea anything was wrong until I found a strange, painful lump in my right breast. This monster had decided it was going to challenge me in the fight of my life, and I decided right then and there, that I was not going to let it win.

Unexpected Blessings

I began chemotherapy right away, and I took a leave of absence from my job as a teacher at Schmalz Elementary in Katy ISD. This was very hard to do; I missed my students and coworkers deeply. I avoided social events to stay healthy, and I longed for human interaction. I wished to feel well enough to be able to do things with my children and husband.

Even though this journey has been difficult, and still is the hardest thing I have ever been through in my life, I have learned some valuable lessons so far. I have found that it is okay to accept help from others. I have always been the type to take care of everyone else, but I found it hard to let others do the same for me.

I realized that blessing me was blessing them, and that I really needed help. Coworkers, friends, family members, and even complete strangers brought us meals, donated

money to help us with medical costs, cared for our children, prayed for us, and so much more. We will be forever thankful, and all of the generosity reminded me that there are some really great people in this world.

Feeling Beautiful

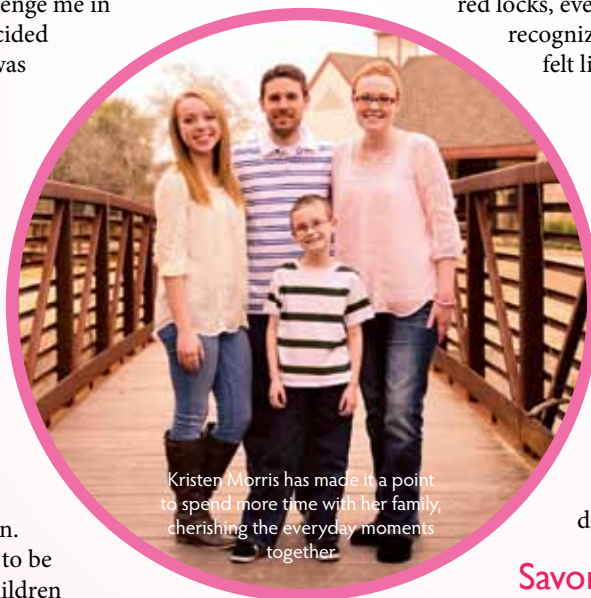
Battling cancer has taught me that the feeling of true beauty comes from within. I have always loved being a redhead. All my life people would comment on my red hair and how unique it makes me. Once I began chemo, I lost all of my red locks, even my eyelashes and eyebrows. I didn’t recognize the woman in the mirror - in fact I felt like a shell of myself.

I not only felt sick, but now I looked like it, too. One day, I woke up and stared at the woman I saw looking at me in the mirror, and thought, “What a strong warrior you are! You are a fighter. You are a soldier of God, and that is what truly makes you beautiful! Yes, you have battle wounds, but that is because you are fighting! Hair or no hair, you are beautiful!” Don’t get me wrong, I missed my hair, but my bald head became a symbol of my determination. That’s empowering.

Savoring Life

This journey has been a lesson in slowing down and learning to savor life along the way. Cancer treatment does not happen overnight, and it can be really overwhelming if I think about how much more I have left to complete. But in the meantime, I focus on the blessings of today and how far I have come. Things are on track, and cancer is losing.

Before cancer, I was always rushing to get things done and was in a constant state of business. This go-go-go lifestyle often caused me to miss the simple pleasures all around me, the gift of each day. I make mini goals for myself and



Kristin Morris has made it a point to spend more time with her family, cherishing the everyday moments together

After being diagnosed with stage three breast cancer, Kristin Morris made the decision to fight back, consequently discovering that true beauty lies deep within ourselves



“One day, I woke up and stared at the woman I saw looking at me in the mirror, and thought, ‘You are a fighter. Hair or no hair, you are beautiful!’”

- Kristin Morris

Morris is thankful for the support of her family, husband Adam and children Parker and Madison



celebrate when I accomplish them. I am grateful that I have to slow down, accept that things take time, recognize accomplishments, and live in the moment.

Choosing to be Positive

Being positive is so important. Although it is not always easy, it is vital. I did not choose cancer, but I can choose my attitude. I can choose to wake up each day being hopeful, and cancer can't take that from me or my family.

By making an effort to be positive, we have found that there is less room for the negative, and for that, we are grateful. I allow myself to have bad days and cry when I need to, but I also make an effort to start fresh the next.

At dinner time or when we are hanging out, my kids, husband, and I like to share with each other three good things about our day. Once we get to talking, we often

find that there are way more than three great things that happened. It is refreshing to take notice of the good.

Despite this exhausting experience of fighting cancer, I feel blessed. My family and I continually thank God for His love, healing, and the strength He gives us to push forward. I am thankful for the amazing people He has placed in my life along the way - my family, my friends, my doctors, even complete strangers. They are all gifts to me. I will never be the same, but that is okay. I am a new me, a stronger me, who is more grateful and a little less hard on myself. I wouldn't trade these lessons for anything. **KM**

EDITOR'S NOTE: We would like to thank Kristin Morris for sharing her story of perseverance and hope. If you have an inspirational story you would like to share, email editor@katymagazine.com.

Breast Cancer Support Group

Methodist Hospital's support group offers encouragement and education to breast cancer patients and survivors. They meet the third Tuesday of each month in the Mesquite Conference Room from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Dinner is served.

To RSVP, call [832-522-5522](tel:832-522-5522) or visit houstonmethodist.org.



Morris rings the bell, symbolizing the last day of her radiation treatments



Despite the loss of her hair, Morris maintains a joyous spirit and accessorizes with brightly colored scarves



The Morrises attended a benefit in Kristin's honor in June 2013

Breast Cancer Prevention Tips

- Know your family history
- Control your weight
- Get an annual mammogram and do monthly self-exams
- Limit alcohol consumption
- Exercise regularly

Source: Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center

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