

Morton Ranch Elementary coach Renee Bonin was not about to let her best friend and fellow teacher Bekah Heiman battle brain cancer alone. She started a Bekah Strong movement that swept through Katy.

A photograph of two women, Renee Bonin and Bekah Heiman, sitting on the roof of a red car. They are both wearing red t-shirts, sunglasses, and blue boxing gloves. They are smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a wooden fence and trees.

STRONGER TOGETHER

With humor and joy, coach Renee Bonin (left) engaged the entire Katy community in support of her best friend and fellow coach, Bekah Heiman, as she battled brain cancer

Written by Kirsten Cornell | Select photography by Anetrius Wallace

What began as a seemingly bad headache, quickly escalated into a frightening diagnosis and full-scale support team for Morton Ranch Elementary (MRE) P.E. coach Bekah Heiman. “I was developing other symptoms in addition to the headache so I went to the ER where they did a CT scan which came back normal,” she recalls. Assuming it was a bad migraine, she was sent on her way.

Over the next few weeks however, she continued to experience pressure in her head and underwent various tests including MRIs, a spinal tap, and a biopsy. "I was diagnosed with a malignant tumor: grade 4 glioblastoma, the meanest and fastest growing glioma cancer on November 30," says Heiman. Doctors were optimistic because of her age, health, and how early it was caught. But Heiman, 35, had another ace in her pocket; her best friend and fellow P.E. coach, Renee Bonin.

Teaching Adventure

In 2013, MRE was on the lookout for an additional P.E. teacher and Heiman was at Memorial Parkway Junior High coaching a young girl named Libby, who happened to be the daughter of MRE's principal, Deb Hubble. "It was the impact she had on Libby that made Deb think she would be perfect for the position," shares Bonin. "After one meeting it was evident that we were meant to work together and it's still crazy to think about how blessed we are that God brought us together that way."

Bonin and Heiman became fast friends and from the outside looking in, you would have thought they grew up next door. "Granted we were also very different, but we were both goofy, loved dressing up, always laughed together, truly enjoyed working together, and could talk to each other about anything and everything," Bonin shares. They not only shared an excellent teaching partnership, but a close friendship in and out of school.

They described teaching together as an adventure you just had to experience. "One of the hardest things through all of this was not having Bekah here by my side," says Bonin. "This isn't a one person job and she's dearly missed for more reasons than one."

Finding Strength

After Heiman's diagnosis, Bonin and the staff at MRE leapt at the chance to give back to someone who had given so much to them. However, they quickly found that Heiman was the one encouraging them with her positive attitude. "We all have pain, struggles, and problems to overcome. When we face something that we know is going to be tough, we only make it harder on ourselves if we focus on the negative," she said.

"She handled it like a champ from day one," says Bonin. "I was finding strength in her and felt I needed to do more." From there, Bonin had the idea to design T-shirts and bracelets that would not only show their love and support for Heiman, but also raise money to help cover the expenses that came along with treatment.

"I had no idea they were going to take off like they did," she admits. What started off with Bonin emailing the MRE staff, some of Heiman's friends, and former coworkers, quickly escalated and she found herself having to add more space to her form to accommodate all of the orders.

"The idea of Bekah Strong reminded all of us to stay strong for her," explains Bonin. Bekah gear was sold to students and other friends around the district. "It was an amazing sight watching so many people come together



Bonin with other Bekah Strong supporters



Heiman maintained her positive and optimistic attitude throughout treatment



Bekah Strong bracelets and T-shirts helped raise money for Heiman's medical expenses

to support Bekah,” Bonin adds. “While her positive and optimistic outlook inspired us, we hoped that our red and pink love inspired her as well.”

Katy Support

Even through the challenges of treatment and not being able to see each other as often as they would have liked, their friendship remained strong and they kept in close communication. “We texted a lot and I sent her random pics or videos from us to help lift her spirits and remind her that we were always thinking about her,” says Bonin, who also adopted a special Bekah Strong haircut. “Before she started treatment I shaved half of my head and I promised to keep the haircut as long as she was in treatment.” The students knew Bonin’s haircut was for Coach Heiman and it reminded them of her. They even randomly rubbed the side of her head for Bekah strength.

Heiman was overwhelmed by the support she received from the Katy community. “Every day I thank God for putting the people that I have met in Katy in my life. The cards, drawings, and gifts I receive on a daily basis encourage and inspire me to keep on keepin’ on. My schools, past and

present, have given me constant motivation, understanding, and support I don’t think I would have gotten anywhere else.”

Sense of Purpose

Heiman never let her diagnosis slow her down and made plans to travel, stick her toes in as many oceans as possible, climb mountains, and seek new adventures. “I will do anything and everything to make people laugh and smile as often as possible because cancer has taught me that this is the only life we are given, so we might as well live it to the fullest.”

Heiman believed that her journey allowed her to reach even more people by sharing her story and giving back to others. “This diagnosis has given me a fierce new sense of purpose. My journey so far has been filled with fear, hope, and courage, but there is strength in each of us to make a choice every day to stay positive and find the good in every situation.” **KM**



KIRSTEN CORNELL is the lead associate editor at Katy Magazine. Her childhood friend and guardian angel, Katy Kidd, also fought a hard battle with brain cancer.

Update: Bekah Heiman lost her battle to cancer on March 21, 2017 as we were preparing this story for print. Our condolences to her husband, Stephen Heiman; parents, Michael and Wendy Wright; sister, Mariah Froehlich; and countless friends at Morton Ranch Elementary and in the community who are grieving the loss of a truly remarkable and inspirational friend and educator.

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