

# Pink Matters

## Grit at every stage: Sarah Shelley's fight with breast cancer

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The Mayo Clinic recommends women begin screening for mammograms at age 40. However, Sarah Shelley, diagnosed with stage three invasive ductal carcinoma at age 30, urges for earlier testing.

In 2017, Shelley worked as a social worker in Peoria, Illinois, for seven years. She detested her job and was anxious about her future— which is what she attributed to her night sweats. Only after she left her job for a new life closer to family in Quincy did she notice the painful lump in her breast.

"I didn't tell anybody at first," Shelley said. "I was scared and hoped it would go away, but it didn't."

That November, Shelley was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer.

Shelley's tumor was too large to operate on, so her oncologist prescribed chemotherapy to shrink it. Every 21 days, Shelley received four drugs over six hours: Taxotere, Carboplatin, Herceptin, and Perjeta (TCHP). After six rounds, Shelley continued receiving Herceptin and Perjeta for the rest of 2018.

Shelley knew that Taxotere and Carboplatin would result in hair loss and sickness, but before the treatments started, it was difficult to conceptualize. "I had started chemo, but I was still trying to function, adjust to

a new city, and work a new full-time job," Shelley said.

Two weeks after her first round of TCHP, Shelley was in line at an Arby's drive-thru when her hair began to fall out. "I had my windows down, and my hair was just coming out in handfuls," Shelley recalled. "I started passing it out the window because I didn't know what else to do with it. It was everywhere; in my eyes, in my mouth. I pulled up to the window, and the girl was like, 'You have a ton of hair coming out of your car.' It was then that it hit me: all this hair is just; it's all going to fall out. I shaved it after that."

Like most cancer patients, chemo was brutal on her body. "The first three days after I had the chemo were okay, but days five through seven were the hardest."

Side effects included nausea, bone pain, diarrhea, vomiting, dehydration, headaches, and mouth sores. "I would gargle with a water and baking soda mixture multiple times a day just to take the soreness out of my mouth," Shelley said.

In addition, chemo changed the taste of the food for Shelley and made rest difficult. "You're constantly wired because you're on steroids," Shelley said. "Then you're emotional because you're tired. Chemo-brain is a real thing. It makes you all over the place and forgetful."

In May 2018, Shelley had a double mastectomy. During



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**Sarah Shelley with her boyfriend, Jarrod Eward. After two bouts with breast cancer, Shelley is currently in remission and happily resides in Hamilton.**

the procedure, the surgeon removed 13 cancer-riddled lymph nodes. Before concluding the surgery, the surgeon placed expanders in Shelley's chest to prepare her body for implants.

Post-surgery, Shelley went to physical therapy to learn exercises and massages to push fluid across her shoulders and breasts and down the right side of her body towards her hips. In addition, Shelley bought a compression sleeve for her left arm. Without the daily exercises, massages, or compression, Shelley would experience severe swelling and fluid build-up in her arms.

In August 2018, Shelley began radiation. Treatments took 25 minutes and

were five days a week. "It was miserable," Shelley said. "My skin cooked from the inside out." As a result, she could only complete 28 of her 33 scheduled treatments, leaving her with painful scars.

In December 2018, Shelley finished her final round of chemotherapy and was officially in remission. Between radiation and chemo, Shelley went to the doctor to fill her expanders with saline to slowly stretch her skin and prepare her body for implants. In a final procedure to end her year with cancer, she had breast reconstruction. The surgery was successful, but Shelley began to experience capsular contracture. "My scar tissue built up around the implants and caused

muscle spasms." It was uncomfortable, but Shelley was willing to live with it, "At that point, I was glad that I had boobs at all."

After remission, in 2019, Shelley had routine check-ups. On Christmas Eve, Dr. Ali saw something concerning during Shelley's scan. Tearfully, Dr. Ali verified the scan and confirmed Shelley's cancer had returned.

Dr. Ali wanted to start Shelley back on the TCHP chemo treatments and more rounds of radiation. "I felt like it would kill me if I had to do it again," Shelley said. "My hair had just started growing back, and I finally felt good again."

Shelley went for a second opinion and reached out to Cancer Treatment Centers of America, whose campus is just north of Chicago. The oncologists at CTCA reassured Shelley that Dr. Ali had taken the same steps they would have with her initial treatment.

For this treatment, however, CTCA told Shelley they would use a Kadcylla for her chemotherapy, allowing her to keep her hair. They also

said they would not give her more radiation. "I remember my surgeon looked at me and said, 'We're gonna treat this to cure it.' And that was when I had hope again," Shelley said.

In January 2020, Shelley had outpatient surgery that removed her cancerous lymph nodes. "They did a Scout procedure, which uses dye and a little transmitter to detect cancer," Shelley explained. "Using the dye, Scout lights up the cancerous nodes."

In February, Shelley started another year's round of chemotherapy. Originally, she planned to commute to CTCA every three weeks for treatment. However, after COVID began, she and her doctors knew it would be dangerous to travel to Chicago, especially on the train. So, after some discussion and to Shelley's delight, Dr. Ali agreed to give her chemo treatments in Quincy.

Shelley continued working full-time. Her chemo rounds did not make her feel as sick as last time, so she spent her

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# SHELLEY: A long journey fighting cancer

FROM PAGE 3

novel surplus energy changing her lifestyle. Shelley lost 120 pounds. After Shelley started feeling better, she began dating.

In December 2020, Shelley met her now boyfriend, Hamilton native Jarrod Eward. In April 2021, Shelley moved to Hamilton to live with Eward, who helped take care of her after her surgeries.

In April 2021, Shelley had her painful implants removed at CTCA and underwent DIEP Flap surgery. In lieu of synthetic implants, surgeons created an incision from hip to hip and used Shelley's own tissue to create breasts during the procedure. In addition, doctors removed two blood vessels from her stomach to vitalize the fatty tissue that became her new

breasts.

Recovery was long and painful. Shelley had to carefully tend to drains on both sides of her hips and breasts. Chances of infection and instructions to not lift more than two pounds for two months made recovery stressful, but Shelley was able to mend without significant difficulties. Shaping Shelley's breasts required three phases of healing and surgery, which she completed in December 2021.

Now, once again, cancer-free, Shelley works full-time for the Illinois early intervention program and part-time for Stage, a shopping and wellness destination for the breast cancer community.

One of the more beautiful fundamentals reinforced during Shelley's horrific

experience was her support system. "I did not know I had such a huge support system," Shelley said. Shelley's mother moved in with her and took care of all the housework and daily minutiae. Her sister, who she hadn't lived near in 10 years, took her on date nights and spent time with her. She helped Shelley get out of her head and be social when needed.

"There were some really dark times, too," Shelley admitted. "It was a lot of time, energy, and effort for my family to care for me while I was so sick."

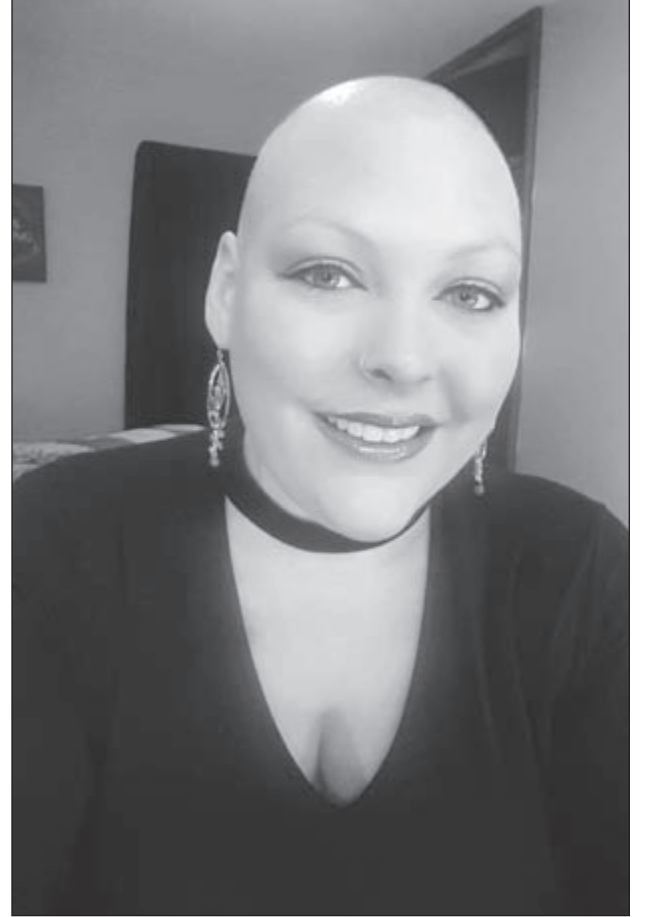
"And sometimes when you're so sick and tired, and your body's fighting so hard, all you can think about is, 'Will the chemo kill me or the cancer first?' It really is a fight for it all. Sometimes, I thought I could end

this myself and be done with it all.

"I remember that night that I was thinking about that, and I would cry in the shower because I thought my mom couldn't hear me—which she later told me that she could.

During this month of Breast Cancer Awareness, reach out to people fighting cancer. Be someone to lean on. "Many people reached out to me and sent me care packages," said Shelley. "Someone from the oldest memories of my childhood reached out to me when I was sick, and I didn't think they knew what I was going through. It was really awesome to have so many people rally behind me."

For more information about Stage, please visit [www.shopstage.co](http://www.shopstage.co)



COURTESY PHOTO

Sarah Shelley pictured December 2017, weeks after starting TCHP chemotherapy.

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