

Ovarian cancer survivor spreads awareness, encouragement

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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PRINT SCRIPT

“During cancer, you have that mindset of ‘am I going to be able to achieve the things that I want? Am I still going to have that future I dreamt of?’”

These questions flooded the mind of Savanna Christensen in June 2020 when she received her first ovarian cancer diagnosis at only 22 years old.

“I was bloated. That was my first symptom that really irked me,” Christensen says. “It looked like a pregnant belly.”

This is even more difficult when one of Christensen’s biggest life goals is to be a mother one day. She experienced sharp pains in her right side and also lost her appetite.

Christensen trusted her gut and went to see an oncologist at OSF HealthCare. She says the doctor became concerned when evaluating her abdomen, and eventually came to the conclusion that Savanna had ovarian cancer.

Savanna had surgery in July 2020 at OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria where she had her right ovary removed.

“I woke up from surgery frantically asking the nurse, ‘did they save my ovary? Did they save anything?’ She said ‘yes, they only took your right ovary and your fallopian tube.’ I passed out after she told me that,” Christensen laughs.

Life went on for Savanna. She got engaged, started working at the Bloomington Fire Department, and was ready to start planning for a family while continuing to do blood tests every 3 months to make sure the cancer didn’t return.

“That was going well, until it wasn’t,” Christensen says. “In late November 2021, they noticed my LDH levels were rising fast.”

That’s when Christensen received the devastating news, for the second time in less than two years.

“A CAT scan revealed there was another mass growing on my left side. When I read that, my heart just sank,” Christensen says. “At my oncologist appointment in December I heard those dreadful words.”

“Your cancer is back.”

With surgery scheduled for January 4, 2022, Savanna was heartbroken, angry and confused.

“I was not OK. I was glad the cancer was caught early and they were going to get rid of it, but I was also being stripped of my chance to try and have children of my own, or even try to harvest my eggs. It was too late,” Christensen says.

Before undergoing surgery for a second time, Christensen’s oncologist talked to her about an alternative, chemotherapy.

She decided to try chemotherapy which started at the end of January 2022.

After her first oncologist retired, began seeing Dr. Michelle Rowland, a gynecological oncologist with OSF HealthCare. Dr. Rowland says Savanna has a fighter’s spirit.

“It’s very rewarding to have worked with somebody through a cancer diagnosis and treatment, which was not an easy treatment for her. But to really see her get back to her life,” Dr. Rowland says.

Dr. Rowland says the unfortunate truth about ovarian cancer, as Savanna found, is that it is sometimes reoccurring.

“Most of the time when we diagnose it, it can be relatively advanced. We have good luck treating it, but it tends to be a cancer that reoccurs or that somebody will have come back at some point in their lifetime,” Dr. Rowland adds.

Dr. Rowland says the symptoms Savanna had when she was first diagnosed are common signs of ovarian cancer.

“A lot of reflux happens sometimes. I’ll see people have that because that bowel is not working as it should. It may be that I eat a few bites of food, but I feel incredibly full. That’s not normal, that’s something we’d want to check out,” Dr. Rowland says.

Facing the challenge of her life, Savanna says each regimen of chemo was three weeks at a time.

“I would be at the infusion center about five to eight hours each day I was there,” Savanna says.

Support systems matter:

Savanna says she was lucky to have an incredible support system surrounding her during this time.

“Family members would come with me every day. We’d play cards, watch TV, have good conversations and take naps,” Christensen laughs. She adds the medical team caring for her was fantastic as well.

“I’ve known this medical team for about three years now. I’m so blessed to have them. They’ve seen the worst parts, the good parts, and all of it,” Savanna says.

Savanna’s hair then began to fall out.

“I remember looking in the mirror and not recognizing myself,” Christensen says. “My brother wanted to shave his head with me, and that was super comforting. I think it was those kinds of moments that pushed me through.”

Her community rallied around Savanna, holding fundraisers, providing food, prayers and more. One embroidery store in Walnut, Illinois made T-shirts saying “Savanna: Nobody fights alone.”

“It’s incredible to see a community gathering around to help someone. By that third and fourth round (of chemo) I was struggling.”

In the midst of treatment, Savanna finally receives some good news.

“A CAT scan revealed the tumor was no longer seen. It worked, my LDH levels were still fluctuating, but they were in the normal range!” Christensen says. “It was the best feeling ever.”

Savanna’s last day of chemo was on April 8, 2022.

Savanna ended up getting blood clots after the chemo was over, but after doing blood thinner injections for six months, she’s just seeing her oncologist every few months.

Savanna’s medical team at OSF all wore the “Nobody fights alone” t-shirts to celebrate her last appointment.

“It brought me to tears. It meant a lot, because they’ve seen the worst parts of this journey and they’ve helped me through it. Just to be able to hug each one of them and say, ‘thank you’ was a special moment.”

Fast forward to today, Savanna is married to the love of her life, Shawn.

“Just to get married, was an achievement that was so relieving. I was able to get there. I was able to walk down the aisle being healthy and having hair,” Savanna smiles.

She now is passionate about spreading awareness about ovarian cancer, which gets extra attention in September, which is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month.

The American Cancer Society (ACS) says about 19,710 women will receive a new diagnosis of ovarian cancer in 2023. Ovarian cancer ranks fifth in cancer deaths among women, but it is relatively rare. The ACS reports about 1 in 78 women get ovarian cancer in their lifetime.

Half of the women who are diagnosed are age 63 or older, so it was extremely rare for Savanna to be diagnosed at such a young age. But she wants to spread a message of encouragement to any woman currently battling the disease.

“This is the hardest fight you might ever take on. You are literally fighting for your life, and you deserve to be celebrated. You are a warrior, you’re a fighter!” Christensen says. “Just make sure you take it easy

on yourself. Take all the steps you need to, whether fast or slow, but just remember to give yourself some credit because this is hard. It's physically and mentally draining.”

[OSF Saint Francis Medical Center treats more than 2,000 newly diagnosed cancer patients each year.](#) In January 2024, [the OSF HealthCare Cancer Institute](#) is expected to open, offering world-class cancer care to [patients around the region.](#)

[You can find out more about the OSF Cancer Institute here.](#)