My Birthday Race

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September 14, 2020 By Julie Mizraji

In 2015, at age 24, I was diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer. My life went from playing sports, working and dating to doctor appointments, wig shopping and hospital visits. This whirlwind of emotion and action included surgery, chemo and radiation. I came out on the other side cancer-free, but that was short-lived.

Four years later, a routine MRI showed that my breast cancer had spread to my lungs. I now have Stage IV metastatic breast cancer, and there is no cure. I will live with this and be treated for it for the rest of my life. At first, I was beyond devastated, but after learning about all the available treatment options, I became more optimistic about my future. Moreover, I had limited side effects on my new oral immunotherapy drug, and I felt comfortable in this new normal.

Several months later, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and I suddenly lost many things that gave me joy—my weekly soccer games, my gym and workout partners and, most important, my drive to better myself. I felt very unmotivated and uninspired. I spoke to my friends, family and my therapist about how to live with purpose again, and then one day, the idea came to me: I would train for a half-marathon and run it on my 30th birthday, in four months.

I researched a training plan online and bought new running shoes, and off I went! Having a structured schedule of three runs a week (two shorter, one longer) changed my daily life dramatically.

I was now motivated to go to sleep earlier, eat healthier and hydrate more. In the last three months, I've explored more of Massachusetts on foot than I have in the last six years. I've learned about pacing and fueling and how to control my breathing. With every run, I feel more accomplished and proud. Not every run is perfect, but I never regret getting out because I know that half the battle is just showing up.

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Recently, I realized that my birthday half-marathon means more to me than establishing a routine again and reaching for a new goal. Running 13.1 miles is also the ultimate “f--- you” to my cancer because not only will I prove that I am still strong, if not stronger, I will do it using my lungs—the part of me where my cancer has spread.

When I was diagnosed as Stage IV, I thought I’d lost the ability to dream and pursue the life I wanted. My future felt so uncertain. Training for my half-marathon has shown me that I can still set and accomplish goals, with even more vigor and fight than I had before.

Since official races are not safe during this pandemic, I have had to get creative. I will run a route

along the Charles River in Waltham, cheered along the course by my friends and family, and I will be dedicating each mile to important people in my life.

My birthday may not be spent traveling to Europe like I once dreamed. But celebrating 30 years of life by running 13.1 miles may be the best present yet.

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