A Hodgkin Lymphoma Diary: Erica Campbell

When Erica Campbell, age 35, was diagnosed with Stage IV Hodgkin lymphoma, she could barely stand. Now, the Washington, DC–area beauty walks runways as a plus-size fashion model.

March 15, 2021 As told to Kate Ferguson

November 2012

I had this persistent cough, so my primary doctor prescribed antibiotics and cough meds. Nothing helped, so my doctor referred me to a radiology clinic for a CT scan. He said it looked like pneumonia and ordered another CT scan with a contrast. He called 45 minutes after that scan and said the lymph nodes near my lungs were swollen, causing the coughing. He suggested that it could be sarcoidosis or lymphoma and that I needed to see a specialist. That's when he scheduled a biopsy for that area.

December 2012

The biopsy result was "non-diagnosis," meaning it hadn't been successful. I'd been experiencing night sweats, fatigue and weight loss. I had looked up lymphoma symptoms and was experiencing some of them, so I was drastically worried. The specialist wanted to send me to another specialist for another biopsy. But I had health insurance issues and put it off for a few months. My health worsened. I couldn't even stand in the shower longer than a few minutes because I'd feel dizzy and light-headed.

March 2013

As they prepped me for the second biopsy, the doctor told me that my red blood cells were very low, so I had to get a transfusion. When I came out of recovery, they took me to my room, where my family was waiting. An hour later, the surgeon came in and said I had Hodgkin lymphoma, which had spread throughout my entire upper body and bone marrow. I was devastated. Before I was released, my oncologist assured me that lymphoma was highly curable, but I was too overwhelmed to be reassured.

April 2013

Before I started chemotherapy, they gave me transfusions of platelets. I spent a lot of time in the hospital because of medical problems. I asked God why He chose me for this journey. But with a lot of spiritual support from my pastor and friends I thought to myself, Why not me?

June 2013

A PET scan showed no evidence of cancer. But to prevent recurrence, I still had to continue treatment. My social worker connected me with someone I could speak to about what I was going through. She also put me in contact with the Lymphoma Research Foundation (LRF) and the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society (LLS).

September 2013

I officially finished chemotherapy. It was a bittersweet day. I was happy to leave, even though I had become used to being in this environment. After that, I saw my doctor probably twice a month, just getting checkups. I also had to do CT scans every couple of months. Then I would get a scan and see my doctor every three months.

May 2014

I shared my story on LRF's Stories of Hope website. I did their 5K lymphoma walk, attended their annual forums and participated in their campaign "Erase Lymphoma." I was invited to do a cancer awareness fashion event where I walked the runway for the first time. This started my modeling career, which flourished during the next few years.

January 2019

My doctor stated that I didn't have to come back and see her for a year or do any more scans. There were no signs of recurrence in my blood work or scans. I had become a survivor, a cancer-free inspirational speaker, able to give hope and encouragement to others.

June 2019

I shared my life-changing story through different magazines. I used modeling as a platform to let other women and young girls know to live your best life even when life throws you a curveball.

September 2019

I was one of 10 women selected out of thousands, from all different walks of life, to participate in the DSW [Designer Shoe Warehouse] Create and Cultivate fashion event. The whole journey was amazing. As a cancer survivor, I was very grateful.

January 2020

Since October, I've been a young adult ambassador with LRF and shared my story at their annual educational forum. At LLS, I am a peer-to-peer First Connection ambassador. I speak with patients newly diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma and answer any questions they have about starting their treatment and survival journeys. My story was featured in Plus Model magazine, on HelloBeautiful.com and on the cover of Luxe Curves magazine.

May 2020

I celebrated my 35th birthday with a few girlfriends and my sisters. But just a couple of days

before my special day, I was sent home from work without pay because of a job-related incident. I kept pushing and did my best to stay positive.

June 2020

My mom and her best girlfriend were hospitalized after being in a car accident. My family was distraught, and I was scared. Because of COVID-19, we could only see her via video chat. I continued to share my cancer survival story and appeared in a video by GCI Health, a communications agency.

August 2020

LRF asked me to participate in a virtual fireside chat with other cancer survivors, patient caregivers and doctors. The event was sponsored by BeiGene, a biotech company. Also, happy news: I am now dating someone very special!

September 2020

It’s National Blood Cancer Awareness Month, and I got to celebrate the seventh anniversary of my last day of chemo. I am going back to work. Look at God. This was a true definition of having faith, because I honestly did not know when I would get that call to return to work. My story was also featured on Get Up DC, a program on the local news station WUSA 9.

January 2021

The New Year is here! Despite COVID-19 and everything else going on, I managed to finish my memoir, I Survived: From Cancer to the Runway. It will be available March 26. Despite the roller-coaster ride cancer took me on, I’ve triumphed and beat the odds in all facets of my life.

Erica CampbellCourtesy of Erica Campbell/Dwayne Hazelwood, @dwayne_hazelwood

Hodgkin Lymphoma 101

One of the most curable forms of cancer, Hodgkin lymphoma usually develops in a type of white blood cell called B cells, which produce antibodies. Treatment may include chemotherapy, radiation therapy, stem cell transplantation or immunotherapy. Doctors may also enroll patients in clinical trials that offer access to new therapies.

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