How a 25-Year-Old Melanoma Skin Cancer Patient Supports Research

Camille Price's life changed when a small spot on her ear was diagnosed as Stage 3 melanoma. Next came targeted therapy—and a marathon.

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Camille Price was visiting her family on Long Island during the summer of 2021 when her mom pointed out what looked like a shallow scrape in her ear. She didn't think much of it at the time but decided to schedule a skin exam just to be sure.

Camille and her family have always been mindful of the sun. Not only do they have light-colored skin, but Camille's father is from Australia — the country with the highest melanoma rates in the world — so sun safety was always important to them. Because of this, Camille saw a dermatologist every few years for a full body skin exam.

So, when Camille went to the dermatologist to get the mark in her ear checked out, she was not particularly worried. In fact, her doctor did not even pick up on it at first glance. And when Camille pointed it out to him, he too was not concerned. Still, he took a biopsy of the mark just to be safe.

However just three days later, Camille's entire life changed when her doctor called to tell her that the biopsy came back as melanoma. Initially, doctors believed Camille's melanoma was Stage 0 or Stage 1 given its location in the ear. However, a second, deeper biopsy was taken which revealed her melanoma might be closer to Stage 2, but ultimately only surgery could verify her official diagnosis.

An Initial Diagnosis and Springing into Action

"Through the shock, my family immediately sprang into action to find out what this meant for me and what to do next," Camille explained. However, she and her family quickly found themselves overwhelmed with the amount of information around treatment options, some of which was outdated and appeared to conflict with other things she found.

In the face of all the conflicting information and advice, Camille and her family were connected with MRA's Chief Executive Officer Dr. Marc Hurlbert. "That introduction was a moment of major clarity for us. His help was invaluable," Camille said. Dr. Hurlbert not only helped "translate" the

complex language that comes with a melanoma diagnosis, he also helped Camille find her care team at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) in New York City.

At MSKCC, Camille had a multidisciplinary care team — which included a dermatologist, pathologist, surgical oncologist, and immunologist — to help guide her through her melanoma journey. The first step in her treatment plan was surgery. While removing the melanoma from her ear, Camille's surgeon conducted a sentinel lymph node biopsy to determine if the cancer had spread. Unfortunately, it was determined that Camille had a satellite tumor (meaning a new tumor developed a small distance from the primary site), indicating that her melanoma had started its journey into her lymphatic system, thus raising the diagnosis to Stage 3. "I had never imaged at only 24-years old that I would have Stage 3 melanoma," Camille said.

Melanoma Survivorship: Defining a New Normal

Following her surgery in August and the alarming increase in her melanoma's staging, biomarker testing identified Camille's melanoma as having a BRAF mutation and she began the targeted therapy combination of Dabrafenib (Tafinlar) + Trametinib (Mekinist). Camille began her one-year treatment cycle in November of 2021, which she continues today, but due to various side effects she has had to pause treatment occasionally and move to an intermittent dosing schedule in order to "carry on living normally," she explained.

The concept of "living normally" has been important to Camille throughout her journey with melanoma. The first few months were a whirlwind, and coming to terms with a cancer diagnosis at such a young age while also living through a global pandemic was fraught with its own challenges. "First of all — nobody ever expects that this will happen to them. Everyone has a connection to cancer, but still, you never really imagine that it will happen to you," said Camille.

For Camille, it was difficult knowing when to share her diagnosis with her community. Initially, there were so many uncertainties and things kept changing — such as her official diagnosis and treatment plan — so opening herself up to questions she didn't have the answers to seemed daunting. During that time, Camille took advantage of various patient resources at MSKCC — like taking part in a support group for young-adult patients.

Once Camille was able to talk about her diagnosis more openly, not only did she feel a sense of relief, but she also began to reclaim her power after melanoma had essentially paused her life. "A critical hurdle I had to get over was being open about what I was going through and allowing myself to release a bit of the burden," Camille remembered. "Being more private in the beginning was the right choice for me, but with every person I've told since, a little bit of that burden has lifted."

Finding Inspiration and Motivation Post-Diagnosis

Part of this reclamation would eventually result in Camille running the Miami Marathon in February of 2022, just six months after her surgery and three months after starting targeted therapy.

Growing up, Camille was always sporty. She played sports through both grade school and college, and running was a passion she and her Dad shared. Despite the constraints of the pandemic and her melanoma diagnosis, running was something Camille was not willing to give up.

In fact, Camille had signed up for the Boston Marathon before the pandemic, but ultimately it was cancelled. These setbacks would not deter her, though, as she set her eyes on the 2022 Miami Marathon.

Camille explained her motivation to run the Miami Marathon as three-fold. First, on a personal level, she was ready to prove to herself that melanoma was not going to stop her from living the life she wanted to live. She had endured some of the most physically and mentally arduous elements of her diagnosis and treatment, and was ready to get back up.

Second, she wanted to raise awareness of melanoma. “In conversations with my friends I realized very few people my age were doing skin checks,” Camille explained. “More people need to be aware of how common melanoma is — and that nobody is truly invincible to it.”

Finally, Camille wanted to give back to the Melanoma Research Alliance. Not only was MRA integral in her journey because of the support she received from Dr. Hurlbert, but Camille was blown away upon learning about the cutting-edge research MRA supports. “I felt like I had something to give back, but also something to gain by benefitting MRA,” she said.

Once officially signed up, Camille created a fundraising page dedicated to her marathon run. This helped hold her accountable for training, and it also served as a public announcement of her diagnosis. Support for Camille came flooding in immediately, and she exceeded her fundraising goal multiple times leading up to race day. Camille and her community ultimately raised $27,526 for MRA — 100% of which will go directly to research.

On the day of the marathon, loved ones and strangers alike cheered Camille on as she pushed through the 26.2 miles in Miami’s heat and humidity. Her parents and close friends flew to Miami to show their support. They met her at several points along the route, even renting bikes to ride alongside her through miles 18 to 21. “Not only were they cheering for me to finish the race, but it almost felt like they were cheering for me to overcome this disease — because that’s what the marathon symbolized to me,” Camille remembered. Camille would go on to cross the finish line that day, which she described as “an emotional high unlike any other.”

Reflecting on her melanoma journey thus far, Camille emphasizes the importance of being vulnerable. It was something she struggled with initially, but she quickly realized that by opening up she could tap into a support system she didn’t necessarily know existed. “It’s hard for people to help if they don’t know what you’re going through,” said Camille.

Camille also advises other people going through their own journey with melanoma to look for joy in life, wherever it can be found. “Don’t let the struggle define you,” Camille said.

Camille’s final message is to never ignore the signs, no matter how small. Being diagnosed with Stage 3 melanoma at 24-years old was something she could have never imagined, but now knows that it can happen to anyone. “No matter how sun safe or young you are, anyone can get melanoma. Go get checked, it can make all the difference,” she said.

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