

Brave & Beautiful

Tammy Elfaye



Tammy Elfaye was going about her life in 2011, happily married to her high school sweetheart, the mother of two sons.

Days were a pleasant, steady routine. She worked in the medical field. Her husband, Ted, was a teacher. The boys played baseball.

Then she was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 41.

"We were frightened because neither side had ever had cancer at that time, and (my husband's) school secretary had cancer," the Plain Township woman said.

"... We never really heard of anybody having cancer who was close to us. You just think, 'I've got two kids.'"

But "I've always had Aultman Hospital physicians ... and they're wonderful to make you feel like you're going to get through this."

Elfaye won that battle with breast cancer, but two more were to follow, including a third diagnosis earlier this year.

Through treatment and medication, she's made progress, and it hasn't stopped her from working as a practice manager for Aultman Hospital. And Elfaye draws from her personal experience in an effort to comfort others whose lives have been upended by cancer.

Life

Elfaye's husband is a teacher at the AIM Academy in Canton City Schools.

They are parents of two sons, Teddy, 21, who attends Kent State University at Stark and Tommy, 16, a student at GlenOak High School.

"We are very community-driven, so (my husband) was a baseball coach for our oldest son as well as our youngest son," Elfaye said of youth baseball.

And "I have a lot of girlfriends," she added. "We like to go to concerts and do normal stuff."

Diagnosis and treatment

"The first time it was caught very early, and so they did a lumpectomy, and I had to do radiation and would go to a mammography every six months," said Elfaye, 51.

Five years later, she was diagnosed with breast cancer a second time.

In 2016, Elfaye underwent a double mastectomy, and then her cancer "was gone," she said. In 2020, she noticed a lymph node under her arm, and doctors began monitoring it before removing it.

"It's gone now, but because (breast cancer) came back three times, we're doing a lot of preventative (radiation treatment) and a chemo pill twice a day," Elfaye said, noting she also underwent a total hysterectomy.

This year, she's undergone about 30 radiation treatments. Her last treatment had been scheduled for late summer. Chemotherapy drugs will continue for a total of about two years.

Experience At Aultman

All of Elfaye's cancer treatments have been through Aultman.

And she works for Dr. Sareena Singh at Aultman Gynecologic Oncology, who performed the hysterectomy.

"I see her on a daily basis (through my job), so it was a no-brainer for her to do the surgery," said Elfaye, while complimenting all of her Aultman or Aultman-affiliated physicians from over the years, including Dr. Suzan Cheng and Dr. Joseph Saadey.

"It's just nice because everything is just right there, so from the surgery to radiation to having to walk over to see Dr. (Shruti) Trehan, (who has) made herself available by cellphone, and she's on Facebook."

"She's fantastic," Elfaye said of Trehan. "She just cares (and) she just really takes the time to make sure you're alright."

As Elfaye complimented the dedication and compassion of Trehan and Singh, her voice trailed off into tears.

"They deal with everything from saving someone to someone not making it, and the patients are very, very sick. They hug. They cry. They're just wonderful."

Closing thoughts

Asked to offer a message to other women who are either facing cancer now or might in the future, Elfaye said, "If you feel something, if something doesn't seem right, get checked early."

Of her own cancer, she said, "They found it early every single time, and ... you want to get it checked, and you want that sooner than later."

"And don't be afraid. This is the third, and I'm still positive. I'm still doing my normal, daily work, and I'm still upbeat. I feel (the doctors) have a good handle on it."

When she encounters other cancer patients, Elfaye lends support.

"Just going to radiation (treatment), I'll say hi to everybody. They love to hear that. I've gone through it, and I'm still here. That's scary to people when it's their first time around."

—ED BALINT