

Putting best face forward in cancer battle

Krista Colvin strives to stay active, attractive



Photo by Troy Wayrynen

Krista Colvin, 43, tries on various hats after being fitted for a wig at Brenda Kay Hair Specialties in Portland. Krista makes an effort to look good while she's undergoing chemotherapy to treat aggressive breast cancer.

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Photo by Troy Wayrynen, The Columbian

Artist and friend Elida Field, from left, Krista Colvin and her college friend Carrie Montgomery chat at the Camas Girls Night Out event May 20. Krista frequently wears hats to cover her thinning hair.



Photo by Troy Wayrynen, The Columbian

Krista Colvin, left, works out with help from Casey Stafford, a personal trainer, during a circuit boot camp exercise class in Camas. It was after a similar exercise class that Krista first discovered a lump in her breast.



Photo by Troy Wayrynen

Annie Colvin, 7, and her mother, Krista Colvin, look at “big girl panties” Annie made for the Camas Girls Night Out. Krista helped organize the event to raise money for breast cancer causes. Her blog chronicling her battle with breast cancer is called “Putting on My Big Girl Panties.”

Krista Colvin struggles to mask the roiling chaos inside her body.

Some days are better than others.

On a recent morning, she wants to wear her stretchy black comfy clothes. She denies the urge. Instead, she reaches back into the closet for a brightly colored top and a headband for a lunch date with her 7-year-old daughter, Annie.

There have been dozens of moments like this for the 43-year-old Camas woman undergoing treatment to fight breast cancer. She learns quickly that looking good makes her — and her family — feel more hopeful about the future.

When she was first diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer in March, her ob-gyn gave her a prescription for what Krista nicknamed “happy pills” — generic Xanax, an anti-anxiety medicine. Krista used a pink pen to etch a smiley face on the bottle and then set the pills aside. The energetic entrepreneur couldn’t imagine needing them.

Instead, she committed herself to exercising, eating well, looking good and leaning on her social network to keep her spirits up.

That's why, even as she's undergoing weekly chemotherapy, Krista's sweating in Casey Stafford's garage at 9 a.m. on a recent Friday. Other than walking, Krista had been away from exercise for 10 years until she started taking classes from Casey. It was the push-ups, sit ups and squats in Casey's class that led to the soak in the tub that led to Krista's discovery of the lump in her breast.

"It's wearing me out more than it used to," Krista admits. Casey guides her through modifications that include lifting lighter weights and lowering the intensity of the workouts.

The point is to keep exercising.

"Chemo is an arduous undertaking," says Dr. Kathryn Kolibaba, Krista's oncologist at Northwest Cancer Specialists, which has offices in Vancouver and Portland. "Exercise is critical."

Research shows it combats fatigue, depression, anxiety and muscle loss in cancer patients, and helps maintain blood counts.

"I have plenty of women who hear all the statistics and say I'm going to beat this. That can be lost when people are depressed and sick," Kolibaba says. "I definitely don't restrict any activities any time."

She encourages her patients to at least walk outside or at the mall in bad weather. She makes sure they get enough anti-nausea medicine.

"The nauseated person lays on the couch," she says. "Then they'll be weak and depressed."

For Krista, looking good is a big part of the feel-good equation, too, so she takes measures to cover her thinning hair. She doesn't want to prematurely shave her head because she likes having a little hair to frame her face when she wears hats.

She bought a synthetic wig in a panic when she first started to lose her hair, but she knew she would eventually buy one made with real human hair.

So she visits Brenda Kay, who introduces her to Betty.

Brenda Kay owns a wig shop in Portland. Betty is Krista's nickname for her new wig. After an initial fitting, Brenda pulls the wig onto Krista's head and carefully snips the long hair from India, hand tied in Thailand.

"You sit in my chair a while to get a good cut," Brenda says. Finally, the wig meets her satisfaction. She shows Krista how to pin up what's left of her hair and stretch the wig on over her head. Krista eyes herself in the mirror. Instead of seeing flashes of white scalp through thinning hair, she sees a thick dark bob with a fringe of bangs.

"The sooner you get used to wearing it, the better off you'll be," says Brenda, who works with a lot of chemo patients.

Krista wears it out of the salon, but then puts it away when she gets home.

"If I put on the wig, it feels like I'm getting dressed up," Krista says.

She sticks to her hats, even for the dressy Camas Girls Night Out event in May that she helped organize to raise money for breast cancer causes. She wears a black dress, her favorite boots, a bright pink coat — and a black cap. Not Betty.

She figures she'll save the wig for when she loses all her hair, which she projects will happen about two weeks after she starts a second, stronger round of chemotherapy.

That black cloud is marked on her calendar for June 21, even though she receives good news during the first round.

Dr. Kolibaba started Krista with chemo instead of surgery to remove the cancer so that she could judge whether the cocktail of drugs is working. It is. A scan shows Krista's tumors are shrinking. That doesn't change the course of treatment, however. Krista will proceed with another round of chemo, then surgery to remove her breasts, and then radiation treatment.

By the time Krista wraps up her first round of chemo, a weekly series, she's endured a full slate of side effects. Mostly, she feels exhausted. She cuts her exercise classes to once a week, and then misses a few because of various scheduling conflicts. She lacks appetite, but forces herself to eat because she knows food is fuel her body needs. She knows things will get worse.

"I'm anxious about what's coming next," she says. "I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to be experiencing."

She'll report for chemotherapy less frequently, once every three weeks, but the side effects will be more harsh. She's likely to feel nauseated and have difficulty keeping food down. She'll get sores in her mouth. She will feel even more tired than she does now. She knows all that, but she doesn't know exactly how bad she'll feel.

'I can't manage the unknown," she says.

So she focuses on what she can manage: things around her house. She and husband Mike recently bought a king-size bed to help Krista feel comfortable as she rests more. She knows she needs to buy bedding, but that will lead to other tasks — bringing it inside the house, washing it, getting rid of old bedding — that overwhelm her. This for a woman who used to make her living as a professional organizer.

She looks at other items on her to-do list. She can't bring herself to tackle any of them. She knows a walk will help her feel better, but it's pouring outside again. She feels restless and uncomfortable in her own skin.

She sobs and wails. She curses the cancer that invaded her body.

Then she thinks about the bottle with a smiley face on it.

The next day, after a talk with her husband, she opens the bottle and swallows a pill.

She watches the clock and wonders when the pill will take effect and what she'll feel like when it does.

Next thing she knows, she's busily tapping at the computer, updating her blog.

She feels like herself again.

