



Photo by Dea Celaj/Nighthawk News

Stephanie Motz enjoys a moment with husband Chad and sons Joseph (left) and William during a Breakfast with Santa event at Pamlico Jack's in December.

Motz making the most of every day

By Mary Pat Thompson
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Stephanie Motz was lacing her shoes, getting ready to go rock climbing, when the words came to her. Not wanting to forget, she pulled out her iPhone and typed a narrative into her Notes app:

“Why should a little cancer here and there change what makes us happy?” Motz wrote. “It doesn’t. It won’t. As long as I’m able to do the things I enjoy.”

Powerful and heart-wrenching, the message came from years of hardship and suffering that now are used for inspiration and motivation.

NOV. 4, 2011

“That was a day to remember. That day marked a different life for me,” Motz said.

The science teacher’s life may have been forever changed that dreadful day, but her story really began a few months earlier.

“I was having a lot of headaches. Every single day I was getting a headache, and I had a little spot around my bottom lip that was going numb. I had some cavities filled that summer – I thought maybe the dentist hit some type of nerve,” Motz recalled. “I was having all these weird, painful

symptoms, but when I went to the doctor, I didn’t have an ear infection, there was nothing wrong with my teeth, the likelihood of any dentist ever hitting a nerve that was causing the facial numbness is really unlikely.”

After a long process of elimination, Motz’s doctor finally ordered an MRI in September.

“They found a tumor – a big tumor – pressing on my brain stem. It was behind my left ear,” Motz said. “It got to the point where it was too big to be radiated, (so) they needed to go in and surgically remove it.”

It turned out to be Neurocytoma, a rare form of cancer that consists of fluid-filled spaces found within the ventricles in the brain, according to the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center’s website.

Just 30 years old, Motz went in for her surgery on Nov. 4, 2011. The procedure lasted all day, some 10 to 12 hours in the operating room. Motz regards this early November day as the anniversary of when her life changed forever.

“When I finally woke up I could barely see, I could barely talk, I mean it was crazy. I’m so glad it was the first surgery, because it prepared me for everything after,” Motz said.

The surgery had removed most of the tumor, but Motz was told she had to go through radi-

ation in order to remove the rest of it. Those treatments took place in January and February at the Outer Banks Cancer Center.

“After that, I started to recover. That first surgery really, really turned me upside down. It was wild,” Motz said. “There were a lot of side effects from it. I still don’t have any feeling on the left side of my face. I can move it, but I can’t feel it.”

By 2012, Motz had been through so much more than the average person ever has to deal with. She was ready to start the road to recovery.

THAT WAS ALL, MOMENTARILY

Motz came back to teaching during the 2012-2013 school year. She had taken a year off due to not being in proper physical and mental condition, and missed it unbelievably. Although she was ecstatic to be back in the classroom, it was still a difficult adjustment.

“I think it was a little too early,” Motz said. “I still wasn’t well enough, but I wanted to come back so badly I just did. And luckily I got through it.”

After all of her previous struggles, Motz was ready for some good news.

“December of 2013, my husband and I decided that we were going to try to have kids,” Motz said.

By the beginning of 2014, Motz was pregnant,

and for about six months life was fine and dandy. Everything changed during what was supposed to be a regular doctor’s appointment in July.

Her blood pressure was through the roof – so she was shipped to the hospital and put on bed rest.

Motz ended up delivering her two baby boys on July 20, 2014, three months before their original due date. During her pregnancy, Motz’s doctors did not run a single scan for cancer to ensure the babies’ safety. As soon as they had been delivered, a scan delivered unsettling news.

“There were four new tumors that popped up in my brain. And this was with newborn babies. Premature, just-got-out-of-the-hospital babies,” Motz said. “So I went to Duke and I had surgery in November of 2014, exactly three years later from my first one. They removed the cluster of three in the back, and then I had what is called radiosurgery on the one on the frontal lobe.”

A week after the surgery, Motz came home – finally – to raise her babies in peace.

“Going home after being in the hospital for a long time felt good,” Motz said. “I mean, it was really scary because I didn’t know how to take care of babies at the time. I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I don’t have any nurses helping me?’”

“It definitely took the focus off of me for a while. It had always been me recovering, or making sure I had clear scans, but all the focus went elsewhere and it was kinda nice.”

ONE THING AFTER ANOTHER

Because of all the things she has been through, Motz knows to report any strange or irregular discomfort she feels. So in March, when Motz was experiencing pain pressing specifically on her tailbone, she knew to inform her doctor as soon as possible. They had her in for a scan immediately.

It uncovered six new tumors on her spine.

“All of April and May of 2015, I lived in Durham and I had radiation from the top of my spine all the way to the bottom. It was every day for six-and-a-half weeks,” Motz said. “It was like a torture chamber, I swear to God. It was awful. They made a mold around me, and I was locked into the table. And then they had a mask on me that was molded, too. Then I would go inside this machine where I couldn’t move.”

As soon as the radiation was over, Motz came back to the Outer Banks. She was ready for a normal life. Ready to not be in and out of the hospital every day. Ready to go back to work.

“When you’re at home and you have nothing to do because you’re sick, you want nothing more than to go back to work and do something productive,” Motz said. “There were so many days I couldn’t do anything, that now that I can, I’m gonna optimize my time.”

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Motz is living in Durham – a week into treatment for the six tumors found on her spine. Instead of just sitting around, she is about to go rock climbing. The narrative came. She wrote the words for her, not knowing that by expressing her feelings that night, many others might be impacted. Why let a little adversity change what makes any of us happy?

“Sick,” by definition, means ‘afflicted with ill health or disease; ailing.’ However, this simple word can be perceived in many different ways. There is mental sickness, emotional sickness and, of course, physical sickness. It is a small word with a wide variety of meanings.

I fall quite nicely into this category of ‘sick’ even though I may not look the stereotypical part. I am not weak, vomiting, or lying in pain. I go about my day normally, taking care of our babies, exercising, paying the bills, cleaning, enjoying shopping and eating good food. My kind of ‘sick’ is internal and unseen, controlled with surgeries, radiation, and, in some cases, medicine. Of course, I have some pain, but most of the time it is manageable.

Why am I explaining all of this? If you know me and my husband at all you know that we do not rest on our laurels. We move...we run, Crossfit, bike, climb, swim, hike, etc. Planning adventures and activities keeps our relationship strong and our bodies fit – both physically and mentally. Why should a little cancer here and there change what makes us happy?

It doesn’t. It won’t. As long as I am able I will continue to do the things I enjoy. I know my body and my abilities. I know when to push myself and when to rest. I will not hold back. I will not wait until things ‘get better.’ Only the good Lord knows how long I have left on this green Earth. I will not waste a single second.”

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