



MICHELLE'S BREAST CANCER SURVIVOR STORY

Michelle Buffalo Knuppe (Meskwaki / Dakota) is a mother, a sister, a daughter, an aunt, a friend...she loves to run, get outside as often as possible, and find time for self-care. And, she has been diagnosed with breast cancer. Michelle's children are the loves of her life and her pride in who they are as people, their dedication to education and their community, and family is what she describes as her biggest joy. She has been a caregiver and self-reliant for the better part of her life. With a strong network of loved ones and friends, Michelle now understands the courage it takes to ask for and receive help.

Michelle's self-exam and consistent annual exams led to finding a lump in her breast. Now, only months after her initial diagnosis, Michelle has made the decision to undergo a double mastectomy.

FAMILY HISTORY AND DIAGNOSIS

Michelle is very aware of the history of cancer in her family. Both of her parents have passed away from cancer. Although her mother was not diagnosed with breast cancer, her paternal aunt was. Similar to Michelle, her aunt found a lump during a breast self-exam. Her aunt underwent a lumpectomy and radiation therapy. Because of these situations, Michelle is seriously contemplating doing genetic testing for the breast cancer gene.



TREATMENT JOURNEY

Michelle happened to find a lump days before her annual appointment and because of this her providers required an ultrasound with her mammogram. Having both diagnostic treatments led the providers to find an abnormality in the scans. Michelle had experienced an abnormal result in the past, that was quickly diagnosed as a noncancerous mass, due to dense breast tissue. With this history and recommendations from her providers, Michelle then had a biopsy done on her current mass in late October 2023.

I remember the day the doctor called me...and then he said the “C” word and I was like “That’s NOT the way this is supposed to go”...”. Michelle was devastated.

She had only told her sisters that she was having a biopsy done, not her children, not her friends...she just didn't want people to have to worry about something that likely could have been nothing. Right after the call, she realized that she needed to tell the people in her life. She decided to send a mass text, as she wasn't ready to talk about it. She shared the information, asked for a bit of time and space and for people not to call her.

"I cried everyday. Everyday, I was stressed." Michelle was in the waiting period, waiting to speak to an oncologist and plastic surgeon, waiting to understand the brevity of the positive diagnosis, waiting to learn if the cancer had metastasized.

A week later, she found herself in the doctor's office, meeting with a nurse navigator and her cancer surgeon. All of the information felt overwhelming, at this early stage she was not retaining the information they were giving her. Michelle then reached out to one of her close friends, a retired doctor, who agreed to go to her appointments with her. This friend would help to ask the questions she needed answers to and circle back with her later with the information they had heard at each appointment. Michelle also decided to start recording her appointments so that when the information and reality of the situation became too overwhelming, she would have the information to access later.

"Stage 1, Invasive lobular carcinoma, estrogen positive, progesterone positive, non-aggressive (no mets)" Michelle found some relief in the fact that the disease was not spreading and that she was at Stage 1. She was given

the option of a lumpectomy or a double mastectomy. She understood that the lumpectomy would remove the diseased area and that the double mastectomy would remove everything. She decided to find out more before making that decision. She immediately requested further scans, an MRI. With the MRI, the providers found two more spots in the same breast, which were then biopsied. By this time, it was early December 2023, and Michelle was exhausted.

Michelle received the news that the two additional spots were non-cancerous. Again, she felt relief, and her initial thought was that she would go forward with a lumpectomy. To her surprise, the provider recommended a double mastectomy due to the overall viewing and results of the MRI.





Although the spots were non-cancerous, the MRI “lit up.” Michelle was confused; she just received the good news about the spots and now the doctor was recommending something that felt as though she had cancer. After further conversation, she understood that what the doctor had seen in the MRI was concerning. The “lit up” spots could or could not be cancerous, and there was a lot of it. She let this information sink in and decided to fight this diagnosis aggressively. She settled on the double mastectomy for early 2024.

BEING A SURVIVOR

Michelle is not one to ask others for help but has found all of the love, check-ins, and support amazing. She has been open with her community about this journey and is finding more women in her life who have gone through similar situations and finds comfort in sharing stories and guidance. She has found that the “little” things,

like sharing what type of clothing will be best to wear post-op and what type of chair to sit in has really helped in relieving stress. Michelle has also found that journaling notes from her appointments to her feelings on a given day has been extremely helpful. She uses all of this information to help her prepare for next steps. She has found herself sleeping a bit better at night, as she has settled into her decision. She is planning out past her surgery...ready to run and care for herself with all of the love she has received from her friends and family. Michelle’s journey has been filled with emotion, love, support, and reflection. She is walking through this experience gracefully, reminding us that taking “one day at a time” has helped her stay in a place of hope and determination.

The American Indian Cancer Foundation is deeply grateful to Michelle for the wonderful and sacred advocacy, support, and love she shares with the community.



American Indian Cancer Foundation®

If you are an Indigenous cancer survivor or caregiver and are interested in lending your voice to the Survivor Story Series, please contact communications@aicaf.org.

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