



She must be Superwoman

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As I sat with my colleagues awaiting the arrival of an interview candidate, a familiar face entered the room. She had the brightest smile and the most beautiful, curly, red hair. As her presentation began, I realized that I had worked with her about twenty years earlier at a local hospital. At that time, I had been employed as an MRI technologist, and she'd been a student. Although our interactions had been limited, she'd been memorable for her warmth; she would walk down the hospital hallways smiling and saying hello to everyone.

Her interview went flawlessly, and she was subsequently recommended for, and accepted, a faculty position in Radiologic Sciences where she would teach alongside me. In that moment, I did not yet realize that I was meeting someone who would become one of the most influential individuals in my professional and personal life.

Several months into the semester, during a casual conversation about getting older and acquiring new ailments as women in our forties, she looked at me seriously and said, "I want to share something with you. Nine years ago, I was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer."

My jaw dropped. As a healthcare professional, I understood the gravity of that diagnosis and the generally poor long-term prognosis associated with metastatic disease. Outwardly, she appeared vibrant, energetic, healthy, and profoundly optimistic. I said, "Are you Superwoman?"

She laughed and said, "It was a long road, but I've beaten it, for now".

Approximately eighteen months later, she began experiencing back pain, which initially appeared consistent with musculoskeletal strain, and is a common occupational hazard among healthcare workers. However, as the pain progressed and began radiating to her leg, her physician recommended an MRI of the lumbar spine. She was able to get it scheduled and completed quickly.

The results came in a few days later...

I recall vividly the day she received the report. It was a beautiful fall day; the leaves were turning red and orange, and there was an amazing breeze when she called and asked me to meet her outside in the university courtyard area. When I arrived,

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she was sobbing and handed me her phone, displaying the radiologist's report of her MRI from her electronic medical record. I scanned quickly to the impression, where the words "lesion to L3 suspicious for malignancy" appeared. I grabbed her and hugged her. We cried and just sat there quietly together. Despite the devastating news, her next response was not marked by anger or despair. Instead, she began to plan. She had confronted cancer once before and was prepared to do so again.

In the months that followed, she underwent extensive diagnostic testing, frequent hospitalizations, and chemotherapy treatments. She was adamant about maintaining privacy, choosing not to disclose her condition to faculty or students. She did not want her illness to define her. Even on her most difficult days, she arrived to teach with composure and purpose, maintaining her commitment to her students and profession.

No matter how bad she was feeling, she put on a brave face, rocked her wig, and taught her classes like a superstar. As her disease progressed, walking became increasingly difficult, and the hospital admissions became more frequent. During this time, some of her students who were completing their clinical internships in Computed Tomography (CT) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), were assigned to perform her imaging exams. Although initially uncomfortable with this role reversal, she transformed the experience into a teaching opportunity. She said, "I am your patient, take care of me just like you would anyone else", thus reinforcing lessons of compassion and professionalism.

Near the end of the summer semester, as students were preparing for their national registry examinations in CT and MRI, she was admitted to the intensive care unit. Despite her declining condition, her concern remained focused on her students. She apologized for being unable to attend the

registry review sessions and said, "Please tell the students that I am sorry for not being there."

"Are they ready, do you think they will pass their exams?" she asked. I told her, "Stop, they will be fine; you need to focus on you." But that was not her. She always put others first. She was the most selfless person.

Her condition continued to deteriorate, and she voiced uncertainty about her ability to overcome the disease again. She said, "I don't know if I am going to beat this." A few days later, she passed away.

By definition, a "superwoman" is a woman with exceptional strength or ability. She embodied this definition fully. From her, I have learned invaluable lessons that continue to shape me into the person I am, and for that I will be forever grateful.

She taught gratitude, expressing thankfulness for the additional years she was given after her initial diagnosis. She said, "I got nine extra years that I didn't think I was going to get." And she made the most of each one. She demonstrated the importance of not taking a single day for granted. One example is through coaching her daughter's soccer team despite significant physical pain.

She exemplified selflessness by putting others first, shown by prioritizing her student's success while being ill. She modeled compassion by consistently checking on a colleagues' well-being despite her own suffering. She was an exceptional listener, offering validation, thoughtful advice, presence without judgment, and a knack for making you feel like you were the most important person.

Her resilience was shown through her positive outlook. She never expressed bitterness toward her diagnosis but instead adapted with dignity and grace. Not only was her dedication shown through her

devotion to her students, but more so with her husband and daughter. Her daughter was her whole world, and that love became a powerful motivator and a sustaining force throughout her illness, carrying her through her most difficult moments. Her daughter is a strong, independent, little girl with that fiery red-hair personality, just like her momma. Finally, her positivity. Every time I would walk into her office, I was greeted with a big smile and a “Hey Girl” no matter what kind of day she was having.

Gosh, I miss her!

With her husband’s blessing, I am thankful to be able to share her story so that her light and positivity may continue to shine and inspire others. I am a better person for having known her. She taught me that true strength lies in facing life’s hardest battles with grace, love, and unwavering dedication to others. To me, she is a true superwoman, but even superheroes must rest. Until we meet again, my friend.
