

Survival and Hope Life After Cancer



Michelle Croteau
BREAST CANCER - Diagnosed 2017

The Basics:

- **Resides:** Rialto
- **Occupation:** Co-owner, The Camp Transformation Center, Hesperia
- **Family:** Husband Jeff Croteau; son Angelo Delonnie, 19 and daughter Hayden Croteau, 11.
- **Hobbies:** Too busy for hobbies but enjoys singing and going to drive-in movies
- **Philosophy:** Having cancer gives you a unique perspective on life ... of making a conscience choice of positive or negative. What I have gone through is very painful; what I have gotten from it is very powerful.

By Alberta Hale Crigler

Rialto residents Michelle Croteau, 46, and her husband, Jeff Croteau, 38, own The Camp Transformation Center in Hesperia. Their business was just voted best Independent Fitness Center in the 2018 Daily Press Best of the Desert competition. The Croteaus also own two more centers in Dallas, Texas, and plans are in the works to open another High Desert center in Victorville next year, and two more centers in Texas later this year.

But on Mother's Day last year, Michelle made a discovery that could have derailed the Croteau family's future: She discovered a lump on her breast.

"The next morning after Mother's Day, I went to urgent care," Michelle said. "I got in (to radiology) two days later and got results that day. The radiologist said, 'It's got to come out, I believe you have cancer' she said."

"It was awful. A biopsy was scheduled for confirmation. My husband was in Texas, so I was here by myself," Michelle said.

"My family lives here - my mom and my sister, but I didn't want to worry them. I tried to stay very private because I didn't want to upset them. My husband got a flight back that week," she said. But that day, "I sat in the parking lot at Kaiser ... and sobbed by myself. I was all alone," she said.

"I found the lump on Mother's Day of last year, May 19," Michelle said. "I had three surgeries right after I was diagnosed," she said.

Doctors first operated in June and removed an approximately 1.7-centimeter tumor plus lymph nodes under her arm. "My cancer was invasive ductal carcinoma (DCIS) and HER2 positive - very aggressive and fast growing," she said. Doctors told her that HER2 is present in less than 20 percent of breast cancers.



The biopsy results also indicated her tumor margins - the tissues around the tumor site - were not "clean," and she had to return for a second surgery.

In that surgery, "two weeks or so" later, "They found a second tumor - same size as the first tumor," Michelle said. Finding another tumor at the primary tumor site was rare. "It was scary to find a second tumor," Michelle said.

Within a month of the second surgery, Michelle was back on the operating table again - this time because the incision site had become infected. Since her lymph nodes had been removed in the initial surgery, Michelle said, her body was not able to ward off infection.

Because of the infection and surgical wound, doctors had to delay chemotherapy. "It had to close from the inside out," Michelle said. "It was a big hole and was packed and cleaned out

three times per day. It took four or five weeks for that to actually close up," she said.

The chemotherapy regimen doctors designed for Michelle was carboplatin and Taxotere every three weeks for six treatments and Herceptin every three weeks for an entire year. "I am still doing the Herceptin now," she said.

Michelle was told HER2 positive tumors have an 80 percent chance of returning within five years. But, she said, "I did a double mastectomy (recently), so that means my chances of it coming back are low." Michelle said the surgery included beginning breast reconstruction that would require more surgeries.

Michelle has another complication from her treatment. "One rare side effect of HER2 is heart damage, and unfortunately, I have that," Michelle said. "They put me on

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a heart medication to see if that will help keep Herceptin from damaging my heart," Michelle said.

In addition to the physical hardship cancer treatment causes, there are also mental stresses. "I felt a very huge guilt of having to put my family through this," she said. "I don't know if that is strange saying that, but it is a weird guilt."

"Nobody close to me had had cancer, and Jeff and I got together right before his dad passed," Michelle said. "My husband took care of his dad and uncle, who both passed away from cancer. He was emotionally equipped to take care of me, although it didn't make it any easier," Michelle said.

Like many cancer victims, Michelle grappled with cancer's impact on appearance, first in anticipation of treatment: "My hair was very long, almost to my waist, and I knew I was going to lose my hair," she said.

After she began treatment, "I was gaining weight, I'm bald, and it was very devastating," she said. "I had never felt so unattractive. I didn't want to look at myself; I didn't want my husband to look at me. He didn't feel that way, but I felt that way about myself," Michelle said.

"My husband has taken care of me from day one. Since we own businesses ... we were able to stay home and get through the surgeries and chemo without having to go to a job site, and that made it a lot easier," she said.

Now Michelle wants to give back. "On May 19 there is a Relay for Life, and they asked me to be the opening speaker. I will talk about

Caregiver Perspective



"My dad passed away of cancer in 2010, and my uncle right before him," said Michelle Croteau's husband, Jeff.

"Although it was a shock, it was something I have already been through, so when I found out Michelle had cancer, it was a blow, but in a weird way, I was ready for it," he said.

"It added another depth to our relationship and has made it stronger. I think if you can deal with something like this, there is almost nothing you can't deal with," Jeff said.

"It scared me because I had lost my dad and uncle. The realization I could lose her too - you know everyone says she is strong, she's a fighter, but my dad was too. It was definitely very scary - and sad," he said.

"I didn't really think about that, though. I just focused on what we had to do to get rid of it. The fact that she caught it so soon was the thing I thought about the most. I never let my mind go to the fact I might lose her. I thought about it once or twice, but I didn't think about it after that," Jeff said.

how what I have gone through is painful, but what I have gained is powerful," Michelle said.

I am part of the American Cancer Society, and I have already reached out to a couple of people," she said. "At my facilities, we do weight loss and transformation. "I am sponsoring people - and I say people and not women - anybody coming out of chemo who has gained weight," Michelle said.

"I want to be able to give back. I want people to know they can contact me and say they have a wife, or a son or daughter that we can help. ... I just want them to know it is available and they can contact me," Michelle said.

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May 19-20, 2018
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Register online to be included in the upcoming events and fundraisers to support our local cancer survivors and honor those that have lost their battle!

www.relayforlife.org
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