

Survival and Hope *Life After Cancer*



Tasha Champion, 38
DIAGNOSIS: BREAST CANCER

The Basics:

- **Resides:** Apple Valley
- **Occupation:** Part time at Dr. Charmaine Earle at Shiloh Center; discharges patients, able to speak with patients newly diagnosed with cancer.
- **Family:** Four children – Destiny, 18; Deonte, 15; Dillan, 13; Denver, 8
- **Hobbies:** Certified master life coach, helps women with self-love and happiness
- **Philosophy:** Encouragement, a positive attitude and faith can get you through just about anything.

Tasha Champion belongs to a close-knit family. But unfortunately, they share more than love, memories and family ties. They also share a variant in their BRCA-1 gene that increases their risk of breast cancer. "My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1997 at the age of 37," Champion said. "She only had a lumpectomy, chemo and radiation. "About 20 years later, her doctor wanted her to be tested for the BRCA gene. He told her if she was positive, her daughters would need to be tested.

"They tested my mom in 2015, and she was positive for BRCA-1, so they already knew what markers to test for with me and my sisters," Champion said. She and her two Sisters also tested positive.

"I had an elective double mastectomy the day before my 36th birthday, Jan.17, 2016," Champion said.

"Once the diagnosis (BRCA-1 positive) came, of course I went into the hospital thinking I was previvor, someone who has predisposition for cancer but has not been diagnosed. I was a survivor.



The elective mastectomies were intended as a preventive measure. But "they found a small tumor, stage 1," Champion said.

"The same thing happened to my sister, two weeks before. Her cancer has just begun to spread. Our cousin passed away from breast cancer two days before my surgery.

"She had four rounds of aggressive chemo, and 12 rounds of milder, because hers had just begun to spread."

Champion's younger sister and her mother also elected to have mastectomies.

After her surgery, "My children stepped up in a major way," Champion said. "They became my everything, my caregivers, and my support. Period.

"My kids were never going to tell me how they felt because they were afraid of hurting my feelings. I had them write letters to cancer at my website, letterstocancer.com, and tell cancer how they felt.

"My daughter, Destiny, was in 11th grade. She maintained being an honor roll student, took care of her brothers, went to every appointment, kept on top of their schooling, and cooked every meal.

"She pretty much became the mother during that time. Now she is planning to enter college in the fall."

At the urging of her doctor, Champion joined a support group through St. Joseph Health, St. Mary in Apple Valley.

"My oncologist had encouraged me a few times, and finally I said yes," Champion said. "She said, 'If my patients had 2 percent of your energy, I think they would do better.'

"Once I joined, I thought not only could they use my energy, but I could use theirs. I would advise any diagnosed patient to join a support group. From the facilitator to the group members, everybody is just wonderful."

Now, through High Desert Cancer Connection, Champion is part of a group of seven women who help local cancer patients and their families.

"We call ourselves the Cancer Awareness Action Team," Champion said.

"Do not do this alone; remember the beauty of who you are, because cancer can't change that"

"We have 'Journey Through Cancer,' a six-week workshop," Champion said. "We bring people together to do different activities

"It gives them the opportunity to connect with people that understand what they have been through and to have a day away from cancer."

High Desert Cancer Connection also gives out Bundles of Hope boxes put together by the Today's Women Foundation. "They are full of goodies and in beautiful decorated boxes of hope," Champion said.

Champion also does "a lot of speaking engagements and I talk to a lot of people who have been diagnosed," she said.

And she urges people to be cancer aware and get checkups. "I am passionate about it because of the effect cancer has had on my family."

Champion tells other survivors: "Do not do this alone; remember the beauty of who you are, because cancer can't change that; and pick an activity that you enjoy and continue to do it."

Caregiver Perspective



Destiny Champion was 16 years old when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. "I was aware my grandmother had it and other people in the family had it," she said.

"A cousin had passed recently. We didn't know how bad it was until everybody started taking the BRCA gene test.

"With mom, it was like sometimes I was nurturing a baby. My mom gave birth to me and nurtured me, and then I nurtured her. The roles were very, very reversed.

"I didn't think about what was going to happen the next day, unless she had a doctor's appointment.

"All of the women on my mom's side had surgery and reconstruction and hysterectomies. It all was just about a year — it started with one of my aunts in August, 2016, then my grandmother by October.

"Then by December, my mom had her hysterectomy. At the beginning of the year, my cousin passed away; a week before that my oldest aunt had her breasts removed, and they found out she had cancer in her tissues. Then mom."

Destiny says her family "wants all of the girls to get tested when they turn 18. I opted not to get tested because I don't want that on my mind."

She said she wants to wait a while, perhaps until she is 20, before she is tested. "At 18 you are still just a baby, trying to find yourself and I don't want to have that on my mind right now," she said.

Destiny says caregivers need help too.

"As caregivers, we need caregiver support. That is number one," she said. "You need an outlet and people who understand what it is like to care for somebody undergoing cancer and chemo treatments."

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Q WHAT DOES SKIN CANCER LOOK LIKE ?

A The skin cancer which occurs most commonly is basal cell carcinoma. It may appear as a non-healing sore or bump on the skin. These should be diagnosed and treated early as their continued growth makes treatment more difficult. If you have any questions about a possible skin cancer, be sure to consult a Board Certified Dermatologist.

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