

Casey DeSantis's Fight

Florida's First Lady opens up about her cancer diagnosis, her passions, and how she plans to 'fight like hell' for her health and Florida's success

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Under a mane of long, wavy, brown hair, Casey DeSantis's blue eyes blaze with passion. Passion for her husband's work as Florida's 46th governor, a role that often has the polarizing Republican leader trading barbs with President Joe Biden and other top Democrats. Passion to raise their three young children to be good citizens, as they keep her dashing ahead of them to protect fragile gifts to the state on the shelves and walls of their home, the publicly owned Governor's Mansion. Passion to further her own special projects aimed at helping Floridians, young and old, to thrive. And passion to "fight like hell" in her battle with breast cancer.

For three weeks after her husband announced the diagnosis in a brief public statement, no further information was released. Floridians clamored for an update about their First Lady on social media. But no news was given. Then, suddenly, the intensely private First Lady had a realization: sharing her story publicly could possibly help others.

So Casey DeSantis broke her silence, sitting down for an interview with an Epoch Times reporter under moss-draped branches of a grandfather oak on the grounds of W.C. Dover Farm in Tallahassee, just 14 miles from her home. With horses grazing in the background, she explained why she'd

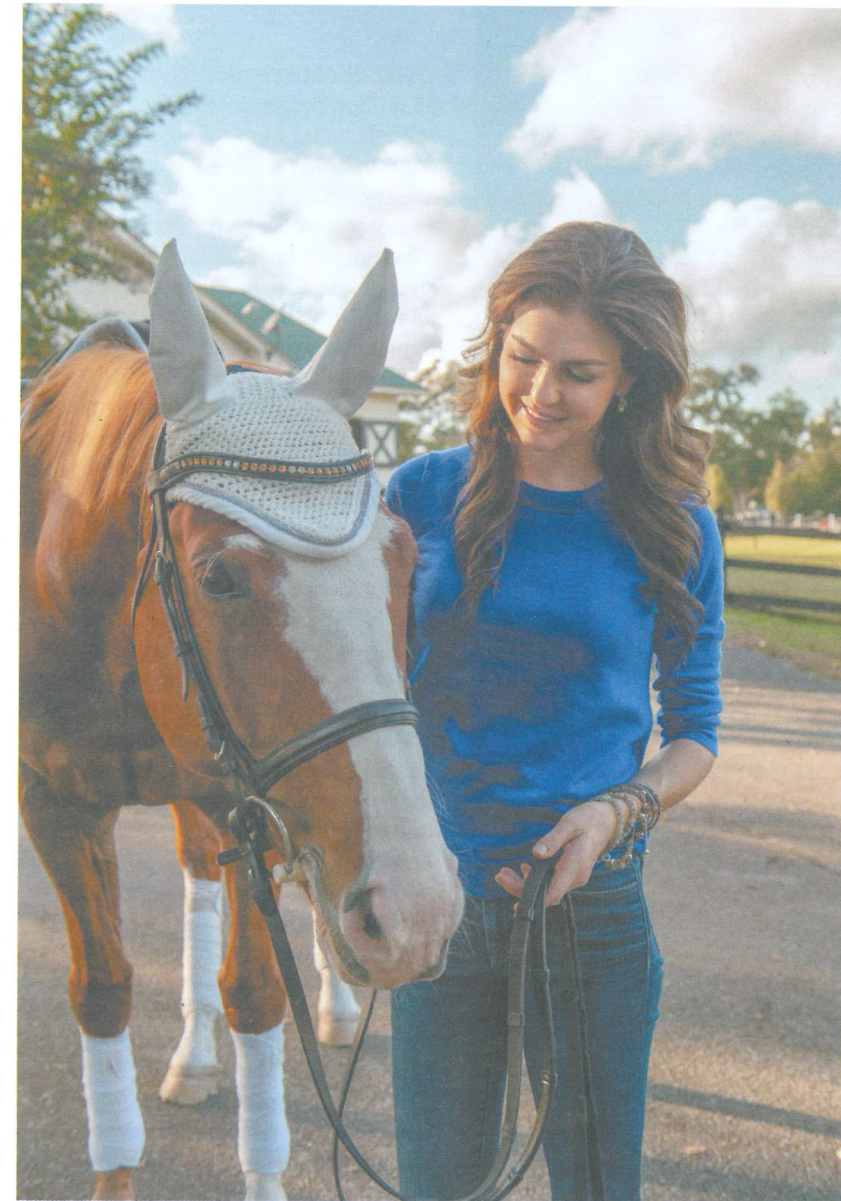
abandoned her usual strict adherence to privacy. "If it helps to save lives," she said, "it's important."

Taking a deep breath, she began her story: "When you get some bad news, you have a choice in what you want to do in life. You can either put your head in the sand, or you can put your tail between your legs, or you can go out and live life to the fullest."

And at first, she did "stick her head in the sand," she admitted. But then, a trip to a hospital to visit children battling cancer made a powerful truth well up inside her. The fight to reclaim her health had come with a blessing. It gave her a way to spur others to take on their own challenges with courage.



LEFT Longtime equestrian Casey DeSantis gives an interview on horseback.



Opening Up About Cancer

Her heart swelled as she looked at those children that day, some bald from treatment and hooked to lines dripping powerful anti-cancer drugs into their veins.

"Hey, listen," she told them in an upbeat voice. "I am the First Lady. I have cancer. And I can get out and do things and live life to the fullest. I've got good days, and I've got bad days. But I'll tell you what, you guys: you take it a day at a time. ... Try to do your best to take the good with the good, and the bad with the bad. And when

you go to bed, wake up and it's a whole new day, and fight like hell."

Armed with a new purpose, she felt driven to "try to be a little bit of an inspiration."

"That meant more to me than anything else," she said. She also knew that sharing the story of how she'd discovered her cancer might prompt fellow Floridians to listen to their instincts about their health, and to not wait to seek medical evaluation if they suspected something might be wrong. Her own grim discovery started with a gut feeling. Something

in her body wasn't right. She just knew it.

Her doctor dismissed her concerns after an exam. But she couldn't shake the nagging worry. So a few days later, she asked for a mammogram. The result of the diagnostic test was devastating. Cancer.

Then came the agony of waiting for the details that would map her future. How advanced was the cancer? Was it treatable? Could she expect to keep fighting by her husband's side as he faces reelection in 2022? Would she even see her children grow up?

"There was a lot of uncertainty, and there still is some uncertainty," she said. "But at least we have a plan. We're getting treatment."

"And just like my better half," she said, "I fight like hell. So I have a very optimistic look towards the future."

She declines to speak in specifics about the diagnosis, treatment plan, or prognosis. Instead, she pivots, pointing out highlights of her husband's accomplishments as governor. Her eyes flash with excitement as she describes Florida's massive job growth, even through a pandemic. She smiles, recalling the way people from locked-down states flocked to Florida, even if just for a dinner out and a taste of normalcy.

Her husband's pandemic policies—opening up Florida ahead of other states, fighting against vaccine mandates and mask mandates—have made him a target of criticism. He says he's fighting to protect freedom. And under his leadership, the state has recovered ahead of others, statistics show. "So when people talk about being a fighter, I always look to him, because he's always been my hero," his wife of 12 years said with a beam.

Her voice breaks, and her eyes briefly cloud with tears. "So now I have to be a fighter ... because he is." Looking down, she reaches for a collection of beaded bracelets around her wrist and jangles them gently. "Across the state and the nation, the outpouring of support has been just wonderful. These are just some of the bracelets that people have sent in with well wishes and prayers. And to know that people are praying for you. Gosh, it

means the world.

“My husband, who is a fighter, who’s got my back 110 percent—he’s been fighting for the country. Well, now it’s my turn to fight. And I don’t want to let him down.”

Resilience and Hope

Born Jill Casey Black, she’s no stranger to tough challenges and hard work. At 5, she started riding horses with her mother in Troy, Ohio, and in her teens, she collected regional and national championships riding Arabian-Saddlebred crosses, a breed known as National Show Horses. She competed on a collegiate team, too, and was runner-up to the national champion in her junior year. That still stings a bit, she jokes, after gracefully swinging into the saddle of her borrowed mount, Copper. The interview continues on horseback.

After graduating from the College of Charleston with a degree in economics, she landed jobs in TV, hosting golf programs and working as a reporter, then anchorwoman and talk-show host on local stations.

She met her husband—he was, at the time, serving as a naval officer—at a driving range, where both were practicing golf swings. She kept glancing at a bucket of balls she wanted to use, to see if it remained unclaimed. Standing in the same direction, he thought she was casting glances at him. The awkward mistake led to friendly conversation, some dates, and then marriage in 2009. Four years later, he took a seat in Congress. And in 2019, he was elected Governor of Florida.

Now, as part of his administration, she’s launched three big initiatives aimed at helping Floridians thrive. And focusing on those helps her maintain that fighting spirit.

The first, Resiliency Florida, harnesses the power of personal stories of struggle and triumph, told by big-name athletes, to show kids with mental health issues that they’re not alone and to inspire them to persevere. As part of that program, the First Lady helped develop character education to be taught in Florida’s K–12 schools.

The curriculum illustrates the importance of resiliency, responsibility, and respect. It teaches problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and entrepreneurship. It rewards volunteerism and physical activity.

These are the kinds of attributes that will make Florida’s young people stronger—mentally, emotionally, and physically, she believes.

Over the staccato of horse hooves on pavement, she describes the mission of another favorite project, Hope Florida.

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That state program employs people chosen for their resourcefulness, who seek ways to use a mix of tools—government agencies, faith-based organizations, non-profits, and more—to simply meet needs, great and small. Her eyes light up again, and her voice quickens as she describes the help struggling Floridians might receive from the program. A needed set of bunk beds bought and delivered by a church group. A job offered from a partnering business willing to hire an unemployed single parent. A home-cooked meal delivered by volunteers willing to reach out to a stranger in need. It’s about connecting needy people with resources to move them toward a more hopeful future.

For now, the program helps people involved with the state’s Department of Children and Families—often single mothers or teens aging out of foster care. The First Lady wants to expand it to provide services to those in need who are involved with Veterans Affairs and the Department of Juvenile Justice, as well.

Her third big initiative involves a \$5 million program to show middle schoolers and high schoolers “the why” behind the ubiquitous anti-drug message “Just Say No.” She officially announced the launch recently at a Seminole, Florida, high school, a rival of her husband’s alma mater in nearby Dunedin. And as the students applauded as she described the new program, their 4-year-old daughter, Madison, who had been quietly standing next to her mother, demurely covered her ears with her hands.

Raising small children in the public eye isn’t easy, she laughs. Madison was a toddler when they moved into the Florida Governor’s Mansion. Mason, now 3, had just been born. And precocious Mamie, now almost 2, arrived about the same time the first pandemic-related lockdowns began.

When she and her husband discussed starting a family, they agreed that his service in Congress, forcing him to split time between their Florida home and Washington, D.C., would make it tough to be an involved dad.

Now, even though he criss-crosses the state most days, making public appearances and tackling the day-to-day tasks of governing, he makes it a priority to be home in time for dinner each night, and he puts the kids to bed.

But life with toddlers in a luxurious home borrowed from the citizens of Florida and filled with priceless artifacts is a “bit of a challenge,” the First Lady says with a smile.

Priceless

She compares it to the theme of the long-running Mastercard commercials, which often used humor to describe three wonderful things, then capped the list with something “priceless,” something that couldn’t simply be purchased with the swipe of a credit card.

“There’s a lot of Florida’s irreplaceable history” on display in the mansion, she says earnestly. And she lives with persistent trepidation that something might get broken by a curious toddler.

“It’s like the Mastercard commercial—you break it, you buy it, you know? Or

it’s priceless and you get a bill at the end.”

She and her husband have worked hard to relocate precious things.

“We’ve done a good job of trying to get a lot of the things high enough on the shelves so that they won’t destroy it,” she grins.

She tries to keep the children out of rooms with early-19th-century wallpaper, for example, out of fear they’ll doodle on it, and she’ll be left desperately trying to clean up after their frivolity with a Magic Eraser.

But there was one dreaded day when little Madison wandered from the private part of the residence to the public part, which put artifacts at immediate risk.

Her heart pounded as she watched her toddler pick up a decorative ball of shells. “I could only imagine the story behind it—someone gave it to the State of Florida and—” She nimbly tried to race toward her toddler without alarming her, in an attempt to rescue the delicate object. It seemed like part of a game to Madison.

“She wings it across the floor, onto the bricks, and it shatters in front of everybody,” the First Lady recalled, grimacing.

“I’m thinking, This is it! This is where it all begins. We’re going to start breaking everything, and I’m going to get this big tab, and it’s a Mastercard commercial again. It’s priceless.”

Hastily, as horrified onlookers watched, the First Lady began scooping up shards of the damaged heirloom, her mind racing about how she could possibly replace, or ultimately pay for, the relic.

“And I noticed ... there’s a tag underneath. And it was red. And it said, ‘Home Goods. Sale. \$5.99.’”

“I thought, ‘Hallelujah! We’re gonna make it! They shop just like me.’”

She laughs at the memory. And thinking of her children, her husband, her home, her face becomes serious again.

“They’re the big reason I fight. ... I fight for them. Every day.” ■

