In The Blink Of An Eye

Sherry adopted a black mustang and found a friend in need. “She was wild and trapped in a pen. I felt trapped by cancer,” explains Kovas. “She seemed to sense I needed her.”

Cancer was just a six-letter word for Indio resident Sherry Kovas. It was not something she thought about, and not something she ever thought would be part of her life. But, then, in the blink of an eye, my whole life changed, shares Kovas.

Fifty years old,married for more than 30 years, and the mother of an 11-year-old son, Sherry and her family live on a two and a half acre ranch with horses, goats, dogs, and even parrots and lizards. Sherry grew up on a farm in Illinois, and came to California when she was 18. She has always lived in the country, surrounded by animals, and she loves that kind of life.

Sherry’s other passion is her job. She has worked at Ralphs® for most of her life. She started with Kroger® (which ultimately bought Ralphs) in 1978, and in 1982 opened the first Ralphs store in the Coachella Valley, in Indian Wells. Sherry is a cashier/PIC (person-in-charge), supervising the front-of-the-store activities, including handling the money, and overseeing the cashier lines.

“I truly look forward to coming to work every day because I love my customers and the community we share,” says Kovas.“I have known many of them for more than 30 years, and they have become an important part of my life. And I am devoted to Ralphs, which has been by my side at every step of my journey.”

In 2005, Sherry’s life changed forever.With no family history of breast cancer, Sherry still was extremely conscientious about getting mammograms. In June 2005, she was in a bad car accident.Her air bag deployed, and bruised her chest. Later that year, when Sherry went for her yearly check-up, a lump was discovered on Sherry’s left breast.

The lump was quite small, but Sherry’s mammogram confirmed a mass. Sherry believed it was an aftereffect of the bruising from her car accident, and did not believe it could be cancer.When the mass seemed to grow, Sherry had a biopsy.

“I couldn’t hear the words the surgeon was saying — ‘invasive ductal carcinoma’— the words meant nothing to me, just like the word ‘cancer’ had meant nothing to me,” Sherry remembers.“He told me my tumor was two-centimeters in size; it was not in the blood and not in my lymph nodes. But at that moment, I really did not understand the weight of his words….”When the word “cancer” finally sunk in, Sherry went into a tail spin. She could not stop crying.

After her lumpectomy, Kovas saw Eisenhower Oncologist Luke Dreisbach,MD.“Sherry was young when she was diagnosed.Her cancer was moderately aggressive and was sensitive to hormones — it was stimulated by estrogen. But her lymph nodes were free of cancer, so she had a lumpectomy, followed by a course of chemotherapy, radiation and then hormone therapy to block her estrogen production,” explains Dr. Dreisbach.“Chemo improves your cure rate by approximately 35 percent, and the hormone therapy adds another 55 percent.Overall, we reduced her risk of recurrence dramatically through this course of therapy.”

Sherry had two courses of chemotherapy. “I tried very hard not to let chemo change my life,” Sherry says.“I’m a farm girl…so, I am very strong willed.No matter how weak I felt, I would go out and clean my horse corrals every day. And even though I couldn’t ride…,my animals helped give me strength.”

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—Sherry Kovas

One horse helped Sherry get through her hardest days.“Two months before I was diagnosed, I adopted a black mustang that had been part of a Bureau of Land Management roundup,” shares Kovas. “When I found out I had cancer, I felt we had something in common. She was wild and trapped in a pen. I felt trapped by cancer.” The horse was so wild that Sherry could not even touch her at first.“But soon, she let me stand by her side, and then, she started letting me pet her,” explains Kovas. “She seemed to sense I needed her.”

Sherry returned to work in time to help re-open her store as a new Ralphs Fresh Fare.As part of the grand opening celebration, the store was making contributions to various community organizations. Sherry approached her store manager about a donation to the Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center to thank the staff for all of their support.

“The staff at Lucy Curci Cancer Center do everything they can to make patients comfortable as they go through difficult and stressful treatments,” Sherry says. “Everyone knows your name. They always greet you with a smile,make sure you are warm, try to distract your attention from what you are going through. They bring in therapy pets. There is beautiful music. I cannot say enough good things.”

Sherry gave Ralphs a proposal requesting $5,000 for a new towel and blanket warmer, which helps keep patients warm during treatments. The store responded with a $10,000 donation to Eisenhower. It was the first step in Sherry’s personal commitment to give back, to raise awareness about breast cancer, and to educate women about the importance of screening and the options for treatment.At Ralphs, Sherry helped organize a celebration honoring breast cancer survivors, and was one of 38 Ralphs/Kroger employees whose stories were featured on boxes of Kellogg’s Special K® protein bars. Ralphs also contributed another $5,000 to the Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center.

Sherry’s newest idea was to partner Ralphs with the Center to launch a mobile library that will include books, brochures, and laptops enabling women who do not have access to the Internet to go online and print information. This prompted Ralphs to make another $10,000 donation earmarked directly for this project.“I want to help as many women as I can. I believe that I was given a gift when I survived breast cancer, and now I want to give back to other women who are going through this,” explains Kovas.“The sky is the limit on what we can do if we all work together.”

“Women in their 20s and 30s can get breast cancer; it’s not just older women. I tell every woman I know to do self-exams, see your doctor, and get your mammograms. They found my cancer when I was 45, and they told me it had probably been there for three years,” Kovas explains.“The only thing to fear... is fear itself. I’m here today to tell everyone that you can do anything you put your mind to.Women need to take their health into their own hands…it is so important.”

“I am a perfect example that there is hope for women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer,” Sherry reflects.“It is not a death sentence.You can get through it, and you will be okay.We’ll all be there with you.”

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