

Bouts with cancer can't stop Quintiles marathoner

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The rain had just begun to fall as Susan Sullivan crossed the finish line. The forecast had called for it to start much earlier, but it held off Sunday morning, and the runners of the 2014 Quintiles Wrightsville Beach Marathon and Half Marathon were treated to a cool, overcast morning: perfect running conditions.



Photo by Jason A. Frizzelle

Susan Sullivan finishes the Quintiles Half Marathon ahead of Kris Lefebvre.

"Where I'm from, I'm used to the rain," Sullivan, 69, said. "So it wouldn't have bothered me."

Sullivan lives on Vashon Island, a large island in Washington's Puget Sound. Born in Roanoke Rapids, Sullivan also spent time in Selma and Greensboro before moving west.

An avid runner, Sullivan has always strived to stay active. She's participated in countless marathons and has spent months backpacking all over the world, exploring exotic places such as Nepal and Patagonia.

In early 2011, Sullivan was in the middle of training for The Big Sur Marathon when she woke up one morning feeling ill.

"I woke up and I couldn't move," Sullivan said. "I went to a doctor, who was a family friend, and he immediately sent me to get some blood tests done."

Soon after, Sullivan learned she had been diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma, a cancer of the bone marrow. While research and funding has helped improve the treatment options for multiple myeloma patients, the cancer is still incurable.

Sullivan underwent several rounds of chemotherapy from April through August of 2011, and responded well. So well, in fact, that she was deemed healthy enough to receive a stem cell transplant. The doctors told her that because of her excellent health, there was no reason to believe that the cancer wouldn't show up for another 8-10 years.

On Dec. 9, 2011, Sullivan successfully underwent the transplant. The next morning, she got out of her hospital bed and walked around the block.

Six months after the transplant, she completed a half-marathon. Later that summer, she completed two more. She power-walks races now; the cancer makes it impossible to run long distances.

While she can't run anymore, the determination to race – and to finish – remains Sullivan's greatest motivator.

"I'm a goal-oriented person, that's what pulls me forward," Sullivan said. "Having a

commitment drives me. Crossing that finish line is invigorating.” Sullivan’s persistence has been an inspiration to those around her, especially her son, Konrad Ribeiro.

Ribeiro, who regularly competes in marathons as well as some Ironman triathlons, motivates himself through his mother’s competitive spirit.

“She definitely keeps me from getting lazy,” Ribeiro said. “If I’m struggling with training, I think about what she’s going through. If she’s going through another round of chemotherapy, I can get ... out of bed and run 5 miles.”

In October 2013, Sullivan found a new goal, to raise money and awareness for the Multiple Myeloma Foundation by participating in half-marathons. Sullivan’s walking group, the Vashon Road Crew, completed a half-marathon Sunday in Vashon in her honor.

On Dec. 2, Sullivan registered for the Quintiles half-marathon. She saw it as another opportunity to fundraise, as well as a chance to walk with her lifelong friend Charlotte Bailey, who lives in North Carolina. Bailey had never done a half-marathon before, but was inspired by Sullivan’s attitude.

Two weeks after she registered, Sullivan awoke one morning with blurry vision. After several tests, the doctors told her they had found a tumor in the back of her skull. Two years into her supposed 8-10 year window, Sullivan’s multiple myeloma had returned.

“The first time she was diagnosed, it was shocking,” Ribeiro said. “The second time, I felt much more angry. We thought that we had beaten it back, that the treatment had been successful.”

Sullivan underwent five days of radiation to contain the tumor. She credits Velcade, a relatively new drug, as a primary reason why she’s able to continue racing while sick.

On Friday, Sullivan took the red-eye from Seattle to Wilmington. Forty-eight hours later, she started her half-marathon at 6:15 a.m. and finished a little over three hours later. Her official time was 3:17:42.

As she crossed the finish line, Sullivan went straight to the runner’s tent. The rain had picked up, but she couldn’t suppress a smile.

“I need to find Charlotte, I don’t think she’s finished yet,” she said, venturing back out into the steady rain. “I need to go cheer her on.”

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