

Written by Mike Schulz

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In 2005, Christina Marie Myatt - president of the Countryside Community Theatre's board of directors and owner/artistic director of Davenport's Center Stage Performing Arts Academy - was diagnosed with breast cancer. And not long afterward, as she recalled in our interview, she received a visit from her parents.

"They came out when I was getting ready to go for chemotherapy for the first time," says Myatt, "and my dad said, 'I brought you a gift.' I opened it, and it was his Purple Heart from when he was in Vietnam. And I said, 'Why would you give this to me? I can't take this.' And he said, 'When they hand you this medal, they tell you that this medal is for bravery in the face of an unseen enemy. And watching you, that is what you are doing right now.'"

That medal, says Myatt, "is now in my bedroom, in its own little shadow box, with a little note that says, 'For bravery in the face of an unknown enemy.'" Yet as she well knows, Myatt is but one of millions who have bravely fought breast cancer, and it's her hope to help raise awareness and funds for the continued struggle through her April 3 cabaret performance at Davenport's Col Ballroom - An Evening with Christina Marie: A Benefit for the Genesis Center for Breast Health.

Backed by pianist Thea Engelson and Rod Pierson's (Not-So) Big Band - an ensemble of musicians recruited from Pierson's bigger Big Band - Myatt will perform a blend of period

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standards ("Happy Days Are Here Again," "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," "Fly Me to the Moon") and showtunes ("I Get a Kick Out of You," "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Being Alive"), with all proceeds benefiting the local treatment center that fostered Myatt's recovery. The event celebrates Myatt not only entering her fifth year of survivorship but also her 40th birthday on April 2, and the gifted, funny, and optimistic area talent recently sat down to discuss her illness, her recovery, and the power that the arts have on her positive outlook.

This Is Not Good

Myatt first discovered a lump in 2005, during a routine self-exam, and says that even after being diagnosed with Stage 1 Intraductal Carcinoma, she and husband William chose not to share the news with all of their friends and family members - including their young children.

I had always done self-exams; I have endometriosis, so I'd done them from a very young age. So one time, through the routine, I found something. And I went to the doctor, who said to me, "You're 35 years old. It *can't* be anything. That doesn't make any sense."

So I went in for the mammogram, and I don't know whether you'd call it a sick feeling, but they'd do one test and then go, "Oh, we need to do more pictures" Then, "Oh, we need to do *this* test" And the doctor's saying, "Oh, *that's* interesting. I've never really seen anything like *that* before" And you're sitting there going, "This is *not* good." Then it was, "Now you have to wait over the weekend for the results," and I just knew, all through the weekend, how the tests were gonna come back. And they did.

My daughter, at the time, was three, and my stepson was seven, and my husband and I sat down and I said, "I want their life to be normal. I don't want their life to be about this." So we made a bold decision not to tell them. I know that lots of people say, "How could you *do* that?", but I just didn't want things to be about ... that I had cancer. I didn't want to be the poster child

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for anything. I just wanted something in life that was normal, where we could have our daily routine, and have fun So we didn't tell them.

All my co-workers knew, because I *had* to tell them; there were just certain things I couldn't do, or I'd get too ill. And some friends knew. I didn't take the time to call

all of them. I called one friend and said, "Guess what. It's your responsibility to tell other people, because I can't make these phone calls." And my parents knew, of course, but even my whole family didn't know. I had an uncle who had brain cancer, and my grandparents had already been in and out of the hospital, and it was like, "We can't add this on there. We just can't."

So to this day, some family members don't know. They're coming to the cabaret, though, so we're going to share it with them before that. Because I can't do the cabaret and not talk about it.

Huge Blessings

Wishing to keep her daily routine as close to normal as possible, Myatt continued with her job (from 2001 to 2008) as the Putnam Museum's theatrical programming coordinator. "I missed work when I had my chemotherapy treatments," she says, "and I missed when I was out for surgery - they ask you to take a week off because of everything you're going through. But that was it. I did radiation during my lunch hour, and then come back." Thankfully, she also had a strong support system there to assist her.

My parents were great. They had come to stay with us when we started chemotherapy, because we didn't know what was gonna happen and what it was gonna be like, and if the kids needed something, they could be a nice diversion.

I was very lucky, because I didn't have a lot of nausea. But there were certainly days where I didn't feel well, and just wanted to be left alone, and didn't want to have anything to do with the

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kids. And that's when my father would sweep in and say, "Hey! Guess what! We're gonna go to Happy Joe's!" And the kids were like, "Oh, *Happy Joe's!*" That was a *huge* blessing.

But there were moments at home when I would feel horrible, and my little girl would go, "Look, Mommy!" And she'd sing some song from a show that I did, and it would be hysterical. Just *laughing*

helped. And my husband There were days, during the process, when just having him there was all I needed to make everything else go away. You know, these things you take for granted every single day all of a sudden become so vivid to you.

I can't imagine what it would've been like to go through this alone. I mean, I consider myself a very strong person, but I'm not sure that I could have done that without anybody else. There were so many times where I knew it had nothing to do with me that I made it through the day.



Wonderful, Powerful Thing

Beyond work and family, Myatt says she also continued to find comfort in the arts, choreographing Pleasant Valley High School's Crazy for You, and directing Countryside Community Theatre's 2006 production of

Oliver! w

hile undergoing chemotherapy treatments.

When I first found out I was sick, I went to the [Countryside] board and said, "I'll understand if you don't want me to do this. But right now, I don't have anything that's holding me back, so it's up to you." And they said, "No, we trust you." And people like [previous Center Stage owner] Shellee Frazee, and other folks that I knew, said, "If you need somebody to step in - like if you need somebody to show moves to the cast - I can do that." Everybody was willing to be supportive of the process, which was really kind of cool.

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So I did the best that I could. It was hard sometimes, but once you get to a certain point in directing, you get to sit back a lot. So when I was having bad days, I could sit, and it was okay. And Page Grubb was my music director. He passed away two years ago from cancer, but he had had cancer *before*, so he'd been through it, and sometimes, just all of a sudden, he'd say something to make me laugh because he knew I wasn't feeling well.

The arts are a wonderful, powerful thing. I mean, I always thought that I hated the show *Annie* [which Myatt will actually direct for Countryside this summer]. I swore that I would never, ever direct that show in my life, and if anybody did it, I'd run as far away as I could. But you know what? There's something about that show, like

Oliver! -

that in the dark of an orphanage, in the dark of the streets, there are people who are still happy.

Who find

joy

. You want to sit back and say, "Where do you find the hope and strength in these horrible situations?", but now I know. Because hope is what sustains you. If you don't have that, there

is

no life.

One lady said to me, "I'm amazed by how *positive* you are all the time." And I said, "Well, first of all, I have small children at home. I want to be an example for them, and the example I want to set is that sometimes life throws us really hard things, but you keep moving forward the best that you possibly can." But beyond that, I said, "Nobody

ever

knows when that last day is. If this were the last time that you ever got to talk to me, I wouldn't want you to think, 'Man, she's a

bitch

."

I Will Survive

After two surgeries, six rounds of chemotherapy, and six weeks of radiation, Myatt was declared

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cancer-free, and began, as she says, actually being that poster child she previously hoped not to be. "I became involved with the [Susan G.] Komen [for the Cure] organization," she says, "I sang for their survivor celebration, I've been asked to be part of the race committee" And she'll now be raising funds for the Genesis Center for Breast Health with her cabaret performance - not that the idea, as she freely admits, was originally hers.

My husband, who's always been my number-one fan, had always said to me, "You should do a cabaret evening." And I thought, "Well, that'd be fun, but isn't that a little self-serving?" So I said, "Ugh ... I don't know" But he kept bringing it up, and bringing it up, and finally last year, he said to me, "But you'd do it if it was for a cause you believed in, right? And instead of the focus being on you, it could be on something you could help support." And I said, "Yup. That's true. I would."

So last year, for my 39th birthday, my husband said, "We're going over to Sports Fans [Pizza]." They were doing karaoke, and we were gonna meet friends there. So we get there, and they threw my name in to sing, and they made me sing "I Will Survive," 'cause that's usually my karaoke theme song. And as I finish singing and get ready to leave, my husband comes up and says, "You can't leave yet." And I thought it was gonna be some stupid birthday thing.

But he hands me this CD of Rod Pierson's (Not-So) Big Band, and hands me this mock-up poster, and he says, "I've talked with all these people, and next year, for your 40th birthday, to celebrate five years of survivorship, you're gonna give this cabaret. You're gonna be backed by your own big band, and all the money is gonna go to this charity." And I was really I was pretty flabbergasted.

A former student is gonna design the lighting, and another former student is gonna make me a dress, and it's at the Col Balroom, which is a *wonderful* place to sing. And once my husband and I started planning this, it gave us the chance to tell the kids [about Myatt's cancer]. It was a whole *different* way of telling them, of course, but we kinda said, "We went through this, Mommy's good now, but you need to know because it'll be in the papers and people'll be talking about it, and we don't want you to be surprised." And they were really good about it. Of course, they're older now, so that helps.

So now I get to do this fun cabaret evening, but it's all for a good cause. I just feel like after all these people came forward for me, now it's my turn to give something back, and it's our hope that the money will assist others who otherwise wouldn't have the kind of experience I had. And

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give them the same kind of hope.

Part of a Plan

Since being presented with her clean bill of health, Myatt says that life has resumed to normal - or rather, better than normal. She appeared in Countryside's productions of Seussical and The Sound of Music, co-directed (with her husband) last summer's production of the organization's Annie Get Your Gun, continues a full class schedule at the Center Stage Performing Arts Academy (which she has run since 2008), is currently choreographing Davenport North High School's production of Anything Goes, and, on the eve of her 40th birthday, is continually grateful for the chance to do "all the things you thought could not be possibilities again. I mean, this is it. This is me. And I haven't stopped being me."

Every day now is another day that I'm really glad for what I have. I mean, you know, will the cancer ever come back? My *hope* is no; I mean, I don't think anybody says, "I hope it comes back, 'cause it was fun." It *wasn't*. But it taught me a lot about myself that I didn't know. It allowed me to be really vulnerable and ask for help, which is not in my bag of tricks, usually. I'm usually very independent and do it all on my own and I *couldn't* this time. And that was very humbling for me.

I love my life, I love where I am, and I'm really glad that, in the time that I'm here, I've found a way to use what were unequivocally the most horrible moments in my life to do something that can be good for other people. I just came to the realization that this was something that was supposed to happen to me. That this was part of a plan, whether I understood it or not.

People say to me, "Oh, you're turning 40." I don't care. It doesn't matter how many years it is, it doesn't matter how old you are. One of the kids at

In the Face of an Unseen Enemy: Cancer Survivor Christina Marie Myatt Performs an April 3 Benefit for the

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Davenport North made me laugh, though, because she came up to me and said, "So-and-so said that you're *hot for*
an older person." I'm like, "*Somewhere*
in there is a compliment"

Myatt will perform An Evening with Christina Marie: A Benefit for the Genesis Center for Breast Health at Davenport's Col Ballroom on April 3, beginning at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$15, and can be reserved by calling (563)391-3174. For more information on the event, visit CenterStage-Arts.com .