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From a cough to cancer

Franklin woman becomes advocate for disease fight

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When a cough turned into a stage 4 lung cancer diagnosis, retired teacher and stay-at-home-mom Shelley O'Malley became an advocate for the disease.

"A little irritating cough" led O'Malley, of Franklin, to request a chest X-ray even though her doctor didn't feel it was needed. The result showed a mass on her right lung. Contrary to popular belief – and the first question she would always get – O'Malley has never smoked.

Just as shocking to many, O'Malley believes this was, in a sense, meant to be.

"I truly believe there is a reason for my diagnosis, and there's more than me being diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer and that being the end of my story," said O'Malley, who grew up in Milwaukee and was a teacher with Milwaukee Public Schools before she retired and became a stay-at-home mom after her daughter was born in 1995.

But what is that reason? And how did such a serious condition surface so quickly?

How it started

O'Malley said she got a sore throat in August 2015 and nothing really came of it more than "hypothetical reasons of what it could be." That soreness turned into a cough which persisted until February 2016 when she started getting pain in the right side of her chest.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Breath Savers (from left) Angie Cotteleer, Shelley O'Malley, John Schwab (yoga instructor), Jen Pulvermacher (yoga instructor and team captain), and Kate Meyer.

"OK, now we have to take this seriously," O'Malley said to herself.

O'Malley was in an airport, getting ready to board a plane to visit her kids at the University of Denver for a parent weekend, when she got a phone call from her doctor. It was cancer, she was told. She said she questioned whether she

should fly, but her doctor said there was nothing they could do until that following Monday, so she chose to go on what ended up being a "pretty emotional trip."

O'Malley and her husband of 23 years, Jim, chose to downplay it to the kids, pri-

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TIFFANY STOIBER/NOW MEDIA GROUP

The Hales Corners Library's entire teen space consists of one row of bookshelves and a corner next to the board room. If updated, the library would like to give teens their own space.

Library begins to turn a page

Village considers expanding existing site

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Hales Corners — The Hales Corners Library is taking first steps toward expanding the library, though the actual project is far off.

First, the library will hire a library consultant – an expert on library trends, space assessment, and library development – who will help draft a proposal. Once the draft is done over a several month period, library officials will have a firm idea of what they will need for a renovation, and the project will be concrete enough to send to a public

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O'Malley

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marily because they didn't think the cancer was as far along.

"You know what I'll be fine," she said she thought. "Lots of people go through chemo."

When she returned, she went to a Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, for more information. The doctor didn't want to go down the road of statistics, instead saying "you're young, you're healthy, there's no reason you can't be one of those people that can't make that percentage of survivors."

"There was an extreme calm that I had, strength from God," O'Malley said.

Turning the problem to a passion, O'Malley said she had been feeling as if she should get a job or volunteer somewhere after her son left for college. She said she prayed God would bring something across her plate.

"I'm sure at some point you'll present some place I'm needed," O'Malley said she prayed, that her diagnosis was "something that was meant to be," and "even though it was a stage 4 diagnosis, it's not the end."

Therapeutic push

One of the first people to find out about her diagnosis was her yoga instructor.

"I knew she was so tapped into the world of mind and body and spirit," O'Malley said. "I was going to have to fight mentally, physically and spiritually."

A book titled "Radical Remission," by Dr. Kelly Turner, that was recommended by her in-



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Free to Breathe event to benefit lung cancer research was held in Madison on July 23. Originally planned to be eight hours of yoga, the event was cut short to three due to weather.

structor served as O'Malley's starting point. Describing it as a book about cancer survivors all diagnosed at stage 4, O'Malley said these people "technically shouldn't have lived." She began to wonder how they did it and she found a few commonalities, including diet change, having a strong spiritual connection, following their gut and taking health care into their own hands, as well as social support helping to build a strong reason to live, plus herbs and supplements.

"I can do all these things," O'Malley said. "There's no reason that the stories I'm reading in this book couldn't be my story."

She immediately changed her diet, pulling out sugar and going to a plant-based whole foods regimen. Her diet is based on the concepts of acid and alkaline. O'Malley said cancer likes acidity (dairy, meat, processed food, sugar, etc.) but it doesn't

like alkaline (vegetables, whole foods, etc.). She said one common question she's asked is if she can "cheat" on her diet.

"I'm very regimented," she said. "But my daughter just turned 21 and I cheated and had birthday cake. My son turned 19 this summer and I had cake then too."

She also upped her yoga to four times a week and also ended up doing five rounds of chemotherapy.

As time went on, she gleaned further alternative therapy methods from news articles, television and other sources which, she said, seemingly just kept coming up out of nowhere. Because chemo wears down a body's immune system, she wanted to find ways to build hers up. This led her to take the summer of 2016 off from traditional therapies.

Some of her alternate treatments included IV therapy, an infrared sauna (theory is when you're sick you get a fever and the fever is your body naturally killing of the virus), and hyperbolic oxygen therapy (cancer cells don't thrive in an oxygen environment so if you can oxygenate the cancer won't grow).

"There was a lot of positive things that were happening," she said. "God takes negative things and gives us opportunities."

'Free to Breathe'

She also said she finds herself trying things she may not have before—such as doing yoga on a waverunner.

"If there's something I think I'd really enjoy doing, I'm not going to let fear control me anymore," O'Malley said.

The first inaugural yoga event in Wisconsin for lung cancer called Free to Breathe took place in Madison on July 23, and O'Malley's yoga instructor wanted Shelley on her team. O'Malley said she reached out to other friends and another local instructor—her primary one had transferred to Madison—to join up as well. Some call it coincidence but she thinks it's divine intervention.

"This is the time and place for this diagnosis," O'Malley said matter-of-factly.

Her team, the Breath Savers, was created early on when O'Malley thought she may be too weak to participate. But, in the end, she did, which she attributes to her lifestyle changes.

"I'm kind of defying the odds—yoga four times a week, walking four miles at the same speed as before. I have more energy than I've ever had," O'Malley said.

She said her team also raised over \$3,500 for the event, of about \$70,000 raised in total.

O'Malley described Free to Breathe as a large yoga area with a main instructor and eight hours of yoga with team members and the instructor changing every hour. Unfortunately, due to weather only about three hours of yoga happened at the event.

"This event definitely was something that just kind of fell into my lap," O'Malley said.

"Up until (the event), so much of my focus was on me and my lung cancer, but it was so emotionally moving to be part of a community of people who all have the same goal: beating lung cancer," O'Malley said. It was such a visual reminder the integral role yoga plays in my life

right now as part of my treatment and supportive network rejuvenating me both physically and mentally."

Becoming an advocate

O'Malley said lung cancer has little funding for research because of its connection to smoking, making it a "you brought that on yourself kind of thing" in the minds of some people.

She said she received a "bigger sense of compassion" from people when they found out she didn't smoke.

"I think with everything in life we're so quick to judge," O'Malley said, calling it "natural instinct." "As a society, in general, we have to find some kindness in our heart. Everyone has a different story and everyone comes from a different place. Stop being a society that judges and start being a society that understands."

She said she believes the alternate treatments she did were key to her survival to this point. She wants to bring awareness about the difficulties of cancer and also wants to change the approach on how cancer is fought, saying now the medical profession's approach is just to "poison it, cut it, and burn it."

"There's a reason why the cancer came to you, came to your body, and settled there," O'Malley said. "If you can figure out why that happened and change that, we can eradicate cancer on a grander scale."

O'Malley said she "wholeheartedly believes" she is heading to being cancer free.

"I'm feeling better now than I've ever felt," she said. "I like how I feel better now."

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