

Maria Wells

**Former NPC Women's Bodybuilding Competitor
Cancer Survivor & Advocate**

Age: 65

Husband: Jim Wells—6 children, 4 grandchildren

Occupation: Personal Trainer, Weightlifting Coach & Podcast Host

Promoter: NPC Night of the Gladiators

Website: npcnightofthegladiators.com

Competition Highlights:

1987 NPC Daytona Beach Bodybuilding Classic
Women's Bodybuilding, 1st Place, Class A

Maria Wells discovered a lump under her armpit in January 2024, leading to a cancer diagnosis. Despite being a personal trainer and weightlifting coach, her active lifestyle was disrupted. She sought treatment at the Mayo Clinic, undergoing surgery in May and starting radiation therapy with 19 sessions. Maria also faced previous health issues, including five brain surgeries and bacterial meningitis. She raised over \$1,500 for the Cancer Coalition of Ben Hill and Irwin Counties, aiming to expand fundraising efforts next year. Maria emphasizes the importance of exercise and healthy living in cancer treatment and recovery.



Maria's Professional Life and Impact of Cancer

I teach girls weightlifting at Tiftarea Academy in Tifton, Georgia. I've been in the gym business and been a personal trainer for 45 years.

You are a very busy and active person; how did you discover you had cancer?

I actually had a mammogram in November 2023 and it came back clear. In January, I went to shave under my armpit and I noticed a little lump. I had a doctor's appointment the following week and I said, "I'll just wait and show it to the doctor." The doctor insisted on checking it out. He immediately sent me for an ultrasound. The ultrasound came back very suspicious for cancer. Then I had a biopsy which confirmed it was cancer.

This was the first time you've ever had cancer, how has this whole adventure affected everything that you do?

For a minute, everything I did came to a grinding halt. 2024 has been the cancer year. Everything that I have done has been about the cancer. I didn't stop my life, because I wasn't going to let cancer take me down, and I wasn't going to crawl in a hole. I just continued on. I went to Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville because my friend Michelle encouraged me to go there. I continued to work, I continued to promote the NPC Night of the Gladiators show with my husband Jim and I continued to do my podcast. They were very accommodating to my schedule when it came to surgery and radiation treatment. I had surgery in May and began radiation treatments in September.



Maria's Health History and Resilience

You've had a number of health issues over the last several years that you've approached with the same fortitude and determination. Can you share more about that?

I probably wouldn't be here today had I not been in the fitness industry and tried to stay healthy my whole life. In 2019, I had five brain surgeries between April through September. The second surgery was at UF Health Shands Hospital in Gainesville, Florida. I had a disease called trigeminal neuralgia. The surgery was to try to help relieve the pain because I could not take the medications. I ended up with several complications, including hydrocephalus, which is water on the brain, so a BP shunt was placed in my head then later removed. Next, they put in a titanium plate which also had to be removed. I got bacterial meningitis. Most people don't come back from that, but the Lord just kept me protected and my body was strong. Six months later, I found out that I had cancer. Yes, I have battled two very major diseases here in the last six years, back-to-back, but through my faith and great medical care, I was helped and healed.

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What role has exercise played as you've gone through your health battles?

I can't emphasize enough the importance of taking care of your body, being in tune with your body, and advocating for yourself. If you feel like something's not right, talk to the doctors about it. Trust your gut. I can't imagine where I'd be now had I not been proactive in asking the doctor about the things that didn't feel right. I'd be looking up at the roots rather than looking down on the daisies!

Radiation Treatment and Its Effects

Now you are going through radiation, what is that like?

I've had to endure 19 radiation treatments. You almost can't feel the radiation because it's a buildup, so initially you don't feel anything, similar to when you're out in the sun and you don't feel like you're getting sunburned because it's overcast. Radiation can cause extreme fatigue or it can cause insomnia, everyone responds differently. In my case, the treatments affected my thyroid, which I already take medication for. It can suppress your appetite, it can burn your skin or cause discoloration because the ultraviolet rays are actually going into your body, trying to find the cancer cells and kill them before they grow anymore. It's the microscopic cancer cells, the ones the doctor can't see yet but need to be eliminated, is the reason radiation is used as a form of Preventative Medicine. I had a 1.4-centimeter tumor, and it had metastasized into three little lymph nodes right by the tumor. They put in a dye to see where the cancer is and they removed the three lymph nodes followed by strong treatments of radiation to make sure they got it all. I'm so sensitive, radiation can affect people in so many different ways, and depending on where you are receiving the radiation, it can affect you in different areas of the body. My cancer was on the right breast and on the right side, so the radiation is not affecting my heart, but part of my lung will probably harden as a result of the treatments. Hopefully after the treatments, life will go back to normal, but some people do experience long-term effects of radiation. It is just so important to monitor your health closely.



Fundraising Efforts for Cancer Coalition

This was the first year you used your event, NPC Night of the Gladiators as a fundraising platform for cancer in your area. Tell me a little bit more about that.

Like anything else, until it happens to you, you don't really pay that much attention to it. When I realized that I had cancer, I had the support from a friend Michelle, who was a former figure competitor who had breast cancer that metastasized to her brain in 2019. She's been a significant influence on my journey and is the one who suggested I go to Mayo Clinic. Raising money for cancer was just something I needed to do. In our area here, we have a Cancer Coalition of Ben Hill & Irwin counties. The money that we raised went directly to people and families who need money to help with cancer bills and additional costs of traveling to receive surgeries and treatments. It's expensive, and insurance doesn't pay for everything, so we thought we would raise money and bring awareness to cancer. My friend Michelle Mecca came to speak at the show. There's no cure for her, but through exercise and good nutrition, she has been able to keep her cancer in remission. We raised over \$1,500 for the Cancer Coalition and are excited that this money will go to help families that have cancer. Having the NPC Night of the Gladiators be a platform to bring awareness and raise money for those that need it as they go through cancer is a cause that is close to my heart, and I'm committed to continuing fundraising efforts and making a significant impact on the community.



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How did Michelle and her cancer journey come to be a part of your life?

I don't remember the exact date, brain surgeries have affected my memory, but it was at a bodybuilding show. She told me about her condition and later I interviewed her on FitTalk radio. She is such a beautiful person and we stayed in contact. When I was diagnosed with cancer, my first call was Michelle. She guided me to Mayo clinic, and has made such an impact on my life.





Plans for Future Fundraising and Community Involvement

What are your goals to expand your fundraising efforts?

In addition to Ben Hill and Irwin Counties, I hope to be able to include the Tifton Cancer Coalition and Hello Gorgeous that helps women give them a day of beauty and flowers and takes them out to eat. We are focused on the south Georgia area and we've already started working on that for the next year.

This first year people could donate directly, purchase luminaries and/or recognize a loved one on the Wall of Hearts and we will do that again. Getting an earlier start this year, I'd like to raise about \$10,000 or \$15,000 next year and I think I can. We're talking about a silent auction and a fundraiser dinner.

Importance of Exercise and Healthy Living

What is the most important thing you've learned through this experience?

When I was coming out of surgery, the first thing the medical oncologist said to me was, "Maria, you have got to continue to go to the gym. You've got to work out and you've got to eat healthy foods." Why did the doctor make a point of saying that to me? Because Michelle has gone through surgeries and treatments and she fought the good fight. She's kept her cancer in remission from eating well and from going to the gym. They believe that when you continue to move the body and eat good, you will help heal your body from cancer. Michelle fights cancer of the brain every day of her life, and she will until there's a cure. She's a very special person in my life.

I tell people, "Exercise is the fountain of youth. If you want to live a long life and you want to enjoy a healthy life, then exercise is key." I thought I had a lock on being healthy because I don't drink, I've never smoked, I've loved the Lord, I've always tried to eat healthy and lead a healthy lifestyle. But cancer doesn't care. There's nothing that I could have done to prevent this cancer. It just happened. Nothing I could have done to prevent trigeminal neuralgia. But, had I not exercised and been in good health, I wouldn't be here today. Prioritize your health and move your body regularly to improve your quality of life. Eating healthy and exercising will give you vitality and longevity.

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