

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

Michelle Mecca

Wife & Mother of 2

Former NPC Bikini Competitor

Age: 49

Competition Highlights:

2019 NPC Paradise Coast Championships

Bikini Novice, Class B, 2nd Place

Bikini Masters 35+, 6th Place

Bikini Masters 45+, 4th Place

Bikini Open, Class C, 3rd Place



Michelle Mecca, 49, discusses her journey from bodybuilding to battling stage four HER2-positive breast cancer. She started training to lose pregnancy weight and then decided to compete in bikini contests as her next goal. In 2019, she was diagnosed with stage three cancer, undergoing a double mastectomy and multiple surgeries. Despite losing her hair, she maintained a positive attitude, emphasizing exercise's role in her recovery. The cancer returned 15 months later, leading to a brain tumor diagnosis. Michelle continues aggressive treatment, including chemo and radiation, and advocates for better cancer awareness and support. After a recent surgery, she plans to resume motivational speaking to educate others about stage four cancer.

Michelle's Journey into Bodybuilding

When did you start competing, and how did you get into that?

I was 42. I had started really working out hard about 15 years ago, trying to get the baby weight off, and got in the best shape that I could possibly be in. I started thinking, "What kind of goal can I set for myself?" I looked at CrossFit, but that just did not appeal to me. Instead I decided an NPC competition would be a good goal.

I competed in the bikini division in the Fort Walton area. I chose small shows to emphasize the importance of achieving my goals without overwhelming my life. I had two small children. Of course, I wanted to place, but it wasn't the end of your world if I didn't. Being stage ready, to me, was a win.

Discovery and Diagnosis of Cancer

How did you discover that you had cancer?

I began having blood coming from the nipple. I had no lump, no other symptoms. Then it went away. I went to the doctors, and they said, "Let's watch it." I was up to date on my mammograms, I had done everything I was supposed to do. About six weeks later, I discovered a significant lump in my armpit, which was initially misdiagnosed as scar tissue from old implants. That explanation really made no sense to me and forced me to start advocating for myself. I sought out different doctors and thank God I did, because by the time they found it, it was stage three cancer. I underwent a double mastectomy, lost all my hair due to the harsh chemo, and endured multiple surgeries over two to three years for reconstruction.

The type of cancer I had is called HER2 positive breast cancer. Like I mentioned, It's very aggressive. There are different kinds of breast cancer, hormone driven, estrogen driven, progesterone driven, and HER2 positive. The cancer can also be any combination as well.

Impact of Cancer on Michelle's Life

I don't know that people really understand; were you unable to do anything or were you still able to function because you were still a mother to two children and a wife?

The training I did for the bodybuilding competitions gave me the inner strength and the mental strength to try to get through those years. There are times I felt strong and times I felt terrible. I didn't want my children to see that I was sad or frightened, nor did I want them to feel that way. When my hair started coming out, we made it fun and laughed about shaving my hair and that's how we got through it. I was still working, and I had an office, and I had a chair that would roll out into a bed. And after my chemo infusions, I would lay down for a nap almost every day, and then get back up and work at my desk. I wanted to show my kids that you can be strong in the face of adversity. I truly believe, there are no victims, not in this house. I live by example. Even when I knew my children were scared, I had a lot of support through family and friends to try to keep it positive and tell them their mom's going to be okay. My hair started growing back and I was told I was in remission. We all felt that chapter in our life has passed.

Did the doctors ever say what kind of impacts your exercise and bodybuilding had on the cancer itself, or on the recovery?

When you're stage three, there's kind of a finish line for the medicine and the chemo that they give you so that you go into remission. The exercise helped in my recovery after surgeries and helped me heal quicker.



Return of Cancer and New Diagnosis

I was in remission for 15 months before I began having focal seizures. These seizures are barely noticeable. If you're around someone who is having one, their eyes may glass over or they can lose the use of their arm for maybe 30 seconds to a minute, but they can put their arm down on a table and you would never know they are experiencing a seizure. I didn't know what it was at the time. I thought maybe it was effects from chemo I had in the past. My now husband saw it happen, and it was very scary to him. We went to Mayo Clinic for an MRI. I didn't even stick around for the results because I felt fine. I had been having headaches and all kinds of weird stuff, but I told myself, I'm fine and I wanted to get home to the kids. As my husband and I were driving back from Jacksonville on I-10, the doctor called me. What I thought was nothing, was in fact a brain tumor. We had to pull off on the side of the road; I couldn't breathe. My husband was on the phone with the doctors and within five minutes, a world-renowned neurosurgeon that works at Mayo Clinic called me personally. He said, we're going to work on this. We're going to try to fix this. It was pretty horrible.

The seizures I had been experiencing were caused by a significant brain tumor. The cancer had come back at stage 4. Even still today, exercise has played a crucial role in my recovery, helping me maintain strength and fight the cancer.

“It became even more important for me to exercise and stay in shape, because I'm literally fighting for my life; there's only so much that medicine can do”

“ I call myself a self-proclaimed spokesperson for cancer awareness. My objective is to educate by sharing my story for the purpose of having an impact with a motivational twist. ”

We went back home; it was the weekend. We told the kids immediately, because they were going to see me cry. They are boys, so there wasn't a lot of reaction, but my younger son, Dylan (14 years old) said, "You're going to be fine." I said, "Why do you think I'm going to be fine?" His response was, "Because you beat it before, you're going to beat it again." That plays over and over and over in my mind when I feel weak.

We did go back to the hospital to discuss next steps. There's no cure and there is no chemical that can fix me. They gave me 12-18 months to live. I felt strongly that I needed to share my story. I began speaking to small groups, educating people about this terrible disease and this is what people go through that aren't just stage one, two or three. This is what stage four looks like. Some people just give up at that point. The neurosurgeon decided he did not want to operate right away due to the risk of paralyzing me on my right side. Instead, I started undergoing some really strong radiation to the brain. It's basically radiation surgery; they strap your head to a table and place this Jason mask on you that is bolted to the table. It seemed to have worked and this is when the exercise really started benefiting me, as I began outliving their expectations. I owe it to the exercise I did and the shape I was in. The neurologist later said, "Exercise helps heal the brain." It became even more important for me to exercise and stay in shape, because I'm literally fighting for my life; there's only so much that medicine can do.



Do you continue to go through very aggressive treatment?

There are so many different kinds of stage four, so many different types of cancer. I'm on a regimen where I don't lose my hair. I continue to work out, and I put makeup on every day, because if I make myself look good, I will feel good. People have no idea that I am stage four, on three different chemos, and that I take about 50 pills a day.

I have been fighting cancer for 40 months, and I'm still going strong. We started at a level one chemo treatment. However, cancer is very smart and will figure out ways to beat the chemo, so occasionally we have to change to the next level of chemo treatments. The goal is to try to stay on the lowest level of treatments as possible for as long as possible. As hard as the chemo is and as much as I hate it, I have to look at it as chemo is my friend. Fighting cancer is almost like dancing with the devil. At some point you have to accept it, but it doesn't mean that you don't quit fighting it. You just start working with it. I'm fortunate to still be on the level one chemo treatments even though last fall I had to undergo a craniotomy due to swelling where they discovered more cancer, but not quite at the point where there is a need to switch the chemo to level two.

Michelle's Advocacy and Motivational Speaking

Through all this you continue to do motivational speaking?

I call myself a self-proclaimed spokesperson for cancer awareness. My objective is to educate by sharing my story for the purpose of having an impact with a motivational twist. My story is different; figuratively speaking, I took off the pink. I tell people what stage 4 cancer really looks like and this is why people fight cancer. It's your worst nightmare, it's my worst nightmare, and we need to understand what cancer can do, what the real life of a stage four cancer patient is, the impact on the families, especially the caregivers, and the finances. Many people withdraw, the family is just doing what they can to take care of their loved one, and people don't want others to know about the financial burden cancer can create. We still live with the mindset that we don't want others knowing our business and that insurance is there to take care of the expenses. But neither of those are true. It's ok to ask for help. I've been blessed, but there are others that are not as fortunate and I feel a responsibility to help others understand a cancer patient's needs or small ways they can help. Those that are at a financial disadvantage, forego treatments and suffer greatly. Cancer will attack anybody and it's hard.

The first speech I ever did was at a gym and I talked about the impact exercise had on my journey. A couple of doctors at Mayo Clinic wanted me to share my story and another doctor wanted me to go to a Cancer Convention in Puerto Rico to share my story. I've also spoken in Orlando for Mayo Clinic and at the University of New England, for a breast cancer group I belong to, and I've done interviews for magazines and radio. Most recently, I was honored to speak at the NPC Night of the Gladiators and be a part of the fundraising efforts for the Cancer Coalition in our area.

One other thing that I want to emphasize is, we need to ask the question, "How do you fight?" What does that mean? What is your definition of fighting? Are you advocating for yourself with your doctors? Do you sit in your chemo chair and take your medicine diligently? Does your fight include exercise? Does it include a healthy nutrition plan? We need to ask, "What are you doing to fight?" I think that is something that each patient needs to dig deep and find the answers.

The amount of willingness to push beyond what you think you can do is important. Most people don't realize they're stronger than they think, and they can do more than they think. They don't have to succumb or give in to a disease. Every little thing that can be done to take action in your fight against cancer is important. It really begins with the mental attitude that you go into it with. If you approach your fight with a positive attitude, you tell yourself, "I'm going to be the best that I can be for as long as I can be." That sets the tone and I tell every one of my doctors, "I need you to fight as hard as I am fighting." When you bring that to them, it really brings them out of their routine of day-to-day treatment of cancer patients. When a doctor knows that you're really giving it your all, they're really gonna dig deep with you.



Future Plans and Final Thoughts

What are the next steps for you?

I'm finally recovered from the craniotomy that I feel I can start speaking again. I believe that miracles happen every single day, and I am going to be a miracle. I just am, that's my mindset. I continue to remain optimistic, believing in the importance of fighting cancer with all available means.

I really admire the fight that you have and the difference it made in extending your life. I greatly respect your willingness to share your story to inspire others. For those that don't have cancer, I believe your story of fighting for what you need and what you want, whether that be stepping on the competition stage, or losing 20 lbs, or fighting cancer, allows people to see that they can be mentally tough and they can achieve what they're willing to fight for. I hope you will continue to share your story and that exercise continues to play a huge role for you. Your education and awareness can really enlighten people that more can be done, not only through research, but also how people work through their own battles.

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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.



“ 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.. ”



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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