

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.

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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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