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## Hope in a Box

A breast-cancer diagnosis brings CrossFit HD members Lauren Beard and Carrie Belmore together for a new challenge.

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All Photos: Donald Yeh

"Jess told me you're an infusion nurse at Emory."

When Carrie Belmore heard those words, her heart sank. She looked at 26-year-old Lauren Beard, who had approached Belmore after a workout at CrossFit HD in Atlanta, Ga.

"That's the last thing I thought I'd hear," Belmore said.

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Belmore had seen Beard around the gym, but they had never really talked. They were Facebook friends, but as Belmore said, "You can be Facebook friends without knowing each other."

Belmore looked at the young, vibrant woman in front of her. As an oncology nurse in the cancer center at Emory, she knew nobody would ask that question out of idle curiosity. Their first conversation was not going to be about the workout or what they were going to do over the weekend.

They were going to talk about cancer.

This, however, is not a story about cancer but rather two people who happen to work out at the same box.

### Accidental Diagnosis

On May 14, 2013, a few days before her 26th birthday, Beard was diagnosed with breast cancer.

She found out she carries a BRCA mutation, the same gene mutation that caused Angelina Jolie to have a preventative double mastectomy. Beard will need six

cycles of chemotherapy, a year of biotherapy and a double mastectomy.

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Beard is so young and in such good health that she was only diagnosed through a set of strange circumstances. A former competitive gymnast, cheerleader and diver, Beard had been doing CrossFit since December 2011. While completing the Open workouts in spring 2013, Beard noticed an unusual soreness in her left breast, particularly when she did push-ups and burpees. It annoyed her enough that she went to the doctor.



*Members of CrossFit HD, Belmore (left) and Beard knew each other by sight only but became close friends after Beard's cancer diagnosis.*

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The doctors told her she was being paranoid. It was probably a cyst. They were 99 percent sure. She was young and had no family history of breast cancer. They told her there was no need to even get an ultrasound. She believed them and tried to forget about it.

A few months later, Beard went to the doctor for a tetanus shot.

"I asked the nurse if she would do another breast exam, as it was still bothering me," Beard said.

The nurse refused. She said Beard was too young and could make another appointment to see the doctor if she insisted. Chastened, Beard went home without another exam.

"Ironically, the biggest blessing came in the form of an unrelated allergic reaction to that tetanus shot," Beard said.

She continued: "This took me to a different doctor the next morning, who took me seriously when I mentioned the tenderness in my breast. I otherwise probably wouldn't have ever brought it up again after being told it was nothing twice—but I just had a nagging feeling about it. I got an ultrasound and biopsy that same day, being told the entire time they were sure it was nothing because I was so young."

Less than 12 hours later, Beard got the call. She was lying on the couch, still recovering from the allergic reaction to the tetanus shot. The radiologist opened the conversation with a series of questions that made Beard catch her breath.

"Where are you? Are you alone or is with someone with you? Are you in a good place to talk?" the woman asked.

And then, "We are floored, but you have cancer."

Beard was so young and fit and she appeared so healthy that the first words out of the oncologist's mouth upon meeting her were, "This isn't supposed to be happening to you, is it?"

### The Binder

It was soon after her diagnosis that Beard approached Belmore after a workout. One of Beard's friends from CrossFit HD had told her that Belmore was an oncology nurse. Although she didn't know Belmore personally, the atmosphere at the gym made it easier for Beard to ask for help.

"Our members are like family: dysfunctional yet wholesome,"

Andre Urquiza of CrossFit HD said. "We provide our members with an environment of unity, so that regardless of fitness capability, we are all seen as equal. Our members willingly give back in the same manner we give to them, proactively. It's an extension of home for many of us."

An oncology nurse in the cancer center at Emory University, Belmore works mainly with Phase 1 clinical trials, which involves researching new drugs and testing the response of the patients.

It's not an accident Belmore is a nurse. She's just one of those people who is driven to help others. Even though she works full time as a nurse, competes as a triathlete and faces a long commute from her house to CrossFit HD, Belmore sprang into action to help the woman she knew by sight only.

"I do feel like I have a worse day if I haven't helped someone," Belmore said. "I just love to make someone else's life better. It's empowering."



**Beard has continued to do CrossFit during her treatment, scaling back when she's tired and ramping up when she has the energy.**



***Whether it's at the hospital or at the gym, Belmore keeps an eye on her friend.***

The nurse said she felt honored to be in a position to help Beard.

"A lot of people can give hugs," Belmore said. She knew she could do more. First, Belmore put together a treatment binder for Beard. In it, she included every single side effect Beard might experience and what to do to alleviate them. She explained exactly why Beard would feel sick after treatment and what to do about it. The binder was almost two inches thick.

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**"I do feel like I have a worse day  
if I haven't helped someone."**

**—Carrie Belmore**

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"She included information about nutrition and recipes," Beard said. "There was a letter from a patient and a symptom journal—more information than you could imagine."

Belmore was just getting started.

Her unit is part of the chemotherapy infusion center at Emory, but it's a separate unit within the larger infusion center. It's a relatively calm place because the clinical trials involve fewer people than the general treatment area.

The general infusion center at Emory is crowded and chaotic. Patients wait hours for their treatment. They are only allowed to bring one person with them. Most of the people receiving treatment are decades older than Beard and in the later stages of cancer.

It's a scary place, and Belmore knew this. When Beard headed to the hospital for her first chemotherapy infusion, Belmore told her come to her unit. She told Beard she could bring as many people as she needed.

Beard was going to need extra help because she was trying something unusual: she wanted to keep her hair.

### Beating the Odds

When Beard got her diagnosis, her first question to her oncologist was, "Am I going to lose my hair?"

His answer was simple. "Yes, you are," he said.

Beard didn't accept that as an answer.

"I'm about beating the odds," Beard said.

She wanted to keep being a normal 26-year-old as much as possible. For her, keeping her hair was a big part of that. Not knowing who else to ask, Beard reached out to Belmore, who immediately started doing research.

Belmore found there was something Beard could try. It's a technique used mainly in Europe, and it's not cheap. The patient wears a "cold cap" on her head, which freezes the hair follicles to -50 F. The cold prevents the chemo from damaging the hair on the head.

The treatment requires keeping the cold caps in coolers on dry ice. The caps have to be changed every 30 minutes. If she was going to try to keep her hair, Beard would need space for the cooler and help changing the caps.

Belmore was on hand that first day, when Beard arrived with her boyfriend and parents, dragging a cooler full of dry ice.

"We joked that she and her mom and dad and (boyfriend) were like a circus. They just had this parade of stuff," Belmore said.

Belmore had set aside a room for Beard and her family. In the room was a brand-new Lululemon outfit and a jacket Belmore had purchased for Beard to keep her warm and comfortable.

"I feel like I should bring *you* something," Beard said to Belmore, wondering how to repay her kindness. Recalling that day, Beard is still floored by Belmore's generosity.



*After the shock of the cancer diagnosis faded, the two women discovered they share a sense of humor, a strong faith and a love of college football.*

"She's the most unselfish human being I've ever met," Beard said.

Even though she was working, Belmore checked in every 30 minutes to help Beard change her cold cap.

Now, many rounds into chemotherapy, Beard still has her hair. The hair on her head, that is.

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**"She's the most unselfish human being I've ever met."**

**—Lauren Beard  
on Carrie Belmore**

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"I don't have any body hair," Beard said with a laugh. "I can't believe I paid all that money for laser hair removal."

### **Feeling Normal**

In those first few terrifying weeks, the two women focused on Beard's cancer. However, as time wore on and they spent more time together, they discovered they actually had a lot in common.

"We've become really close friends beyond disease and sickness," Belmore said. "She's taught me a lot."

"They are inseparable now," Urquiza said about Belmore and Beard. "Just yesterday I came in to the gym and they were doing the Filthy Fifty together, and they were doing rhythmic box jumps. It was a bond created through CrossFit."

"We're both athletes, both obsessed with college football. I'm a few steps ahead of her in life," said Belmore, who is married. "She can talk to me about her boyfriend, and I can



*Belmore (left) never thought twice about jumping in to help Beard. It's just who she is.*

share things I've been through. We have the same humor, which is rare. She cracks me up. We both have a big faith background."

As a fellow CrossFit athlete, Belmore understands Beard's desire to work out—even in the midst of chemotherapy treatment.

"It makes me feel normal," Beard said of training at CrossFit HD.

Although Belmore usually starts her day at 5 a.m., then heads to the gym after work and finishes working out by 5:30 p.m., she sticks around until Beard comes to the gym around 6.

"She'll stay to make sure I'm OK," Beard said. Belmore keeps an eye on Beard during the workouts. One day, the WOD included a 400-meter walk with a barbell on the back, interspersed with burpees over the bar.

Weakened by the chemo, Beard struggled to put the bar on her back after finishing her burpees. When Belmore saw her friend struggling, she walked over and lifted the bar onto Beard's back. She stayed by Beard's side during the entire workout, encouraging her and helping her when necessary.

"(We've) become so close," Beard said. "We have a lot in common—the way we grew up and our faith. She gets it."

### A New Perspective

Beard is a different person than she was before the diagnosis. That phone call changed everything.

"Every single CrossFit WOD, I'm thankful," Beard said. "It's given me a different perspective. I'm more sympathetic now. I have a more positive outlook on every aspect of life. Everybody has their own struggle. I appreciate every little thing that I never even gave two thoughts before. The things people take for granted, like working out, have become my little victories."



*Despite all she's been through, Beard is able to recognize the good things that have come out of her diagnosis: patience, perspective and a life-changing friendship.*



**Beard already has her eye on the 2014 Open. She wants to be ready.**

Beard used to get frustrated when she was driving and a pedestrian took too long to cross the road. She doesn't anymore.

"I know what they're going through," she said.

Beard said it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking, "Why me? What did I do wrong?" but she's always reminded that the terrifying and exhausting ordeal brought something wonderful.

"It's given me a friendship with Carrie," Beard said. "That's irreplaceable."

Belmore agrees.

"It's a friendship that will last a lifetime," she said.

Belmore said watching Beard fight cancer with courage and grace has been an inspiration.

"It sucks, but she wants to find every possible positive she can (out of the experience)," she said.

"We work with each other, and for each other, whether it's a 400-meter prowler-push WOD or moving furniture, exchanging professional services, and even health care in the case of (Belmore) and (Beard), where the bond was taken to the next level," Urquiza said about the members of CrossFit HD.

And there has been some good news. After two rounds of chemotherapy, Beard discovered the lump had shrunk so much the doctor couldn't find it. Her body is responding to the treatment.

"My goal is to be recovered for the 2014 Open," Beard said.

She still needs three more rounds of chemo and will go through with the double mastectomy. She'll be undergoing treatment until July 2014, and after that she'll have to take a pill for five years.

"It's funny looking back ... because I've grown so much stronger as a person and in my faith since (the diagnosis)," Beard said. "I've never had as much peace and joy as I have now, even in the midst of the hardest few months of my life. I wouldn't trade any of this journey for the world."

"Cancer may try its best to weaken me physically, but emotionally, mentally, spiritually, I'm stronger than I've ever been."

#### **About the Author:**

*Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor with a background in marketing and communications. An amateur-boxer-turned-CrossFit athlete, Hilary specializes in health and wellness content, focusing on emerging fitness trends. Her writing has been featured in a leading online parenting magazine as well as a number of travel and lifestyle publications. She is an editor for Frommer's travel guides and writes websites, brochures, blogs and newsletters for universities, start-ups, entrepreneurs, accounting and financial service organizations, and management consultants. She lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and spends most of her free time at CrossFit PB. To contact her, visit [HilaryAchauer.com](http://HilaryAchauer.com).*