
THE CrossFit LIFE

I Am Not Cancer. I Am CrossFit.

Exhausted and overwhelmed after battling thyroid cancer, Kelly Knight discovers CrossFit and newfound energy and confidence. Hilary Achauer reports.

By Hilary Achauer

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Malinda Sanchez

Tyson Para, Kelly Knight and Joey Sanchez (l-r) at RSA CrossFit in Washington state.

When Kelly Knight turns on her phone, the first thing she sees is this quote by Martha Washington: "I am determined to be cheerful and happy in whatever situation I may find myself."

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Knight, a 48-year-old registered nurse, has found herself in some dark situations lately. Her son, now 25, has been sick for the past five years. Nobody could figure out the problem until a recent visit to the Mayo Clinic uncovered a tumor in his adrenal glands.

In the midst of caring for and worrying about her son, Knight was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in December 2010. The cancer spread to her lymph nodes, and she went through two full rounds of radiation.

Despite this treatment, Knight's tumor was still so large it destroyed her parathyroid glands, which regulate how much calcium is in the body. This caused Knight to develop tetany, a combination of symptoms caused by very low calcium in the blood. Knight's hands cramp up, her face goes numb, and she has to go to the hospital for intravenous calcium treatments. This past year she ended up in the hospital almost every third day.

"I was exhausted all of the time," Knight said. Looking for something that might make her feel better, she was intrigued when a friend told her about CrossFit.

In October 2011, Knight visited RSA CrossFit in Kennewick, Wash. Owner Joey Sanchez, a cancer survivor himself, greeted her and showed her around. Sanchez was diagnosed with synovial cell sarcoma when he was 15 years old. He almost lost his left arm, but after several surgeries and chemotherapy, he has been cancer-free for 15 years.

Knight started slowly but was immediately hooked. She came to CrossFit two or three times a week, and after a few weeks she found she had more energy throughout the day. Then, in late December, Knight went to the doctor for some tests and a checkup.

"After reviewing my tests, he cut my medicine in half. He asked what I had been doing differently, and I said, 'CrossFit.'"



Joey Sanchez

For cancer survivors like Kelly Knight, CrossFit is a way to just feel like a normal person.

Instead of ending up in the hospital every third day because of tetany, Knight realized she was only going in once a week.

Of course, this is not to say CrossFit cures cancer. There could be any number of reasons for Knight's improved health. Sanchez says while Knight's improved health is amazing, as a fellow cancer survivor, he recognizes another benefit that is just as important.



Joey Sanchez

"I made a decision that I wasn't going to let cancer stop me."

"CrossFit is a way to feel like a normal person, not a cancer patient," Sanchez said. "I always felt like a sick person when I had cancer because everyone felt sorry for me, and I hated it. I wanted to feel normal!"

Knight said the sudden improvement in her health took her by surprise.

"I'm pretty competitive," she said with a laugh. "The more I go, the more I like CrossFit. It's more interesting than anything I've ever done. After dealing with my son's sickness for so long, I made a decision that I wasn't going to let cancer stop me."

According to Sanchez, Knight "embodies everything CrossFit with her heart, determination and the will to survive no matter the circumstances. She comes in after radiation treatments and never complains. She motivates other people even though she doesn't feel well."

"She told me that CrossFit helps her deal with cancer," Sanchez said. "She said that she feels like a normal person in the gym, not someone who is sick."

Knight says she hopes to try a CrossFit competition someday. Her favorite movement is the pull-up; she's progressed to the skinniest band and thinks she'll get an unassisted pull-up very soon.

Knight is undergoing more cancer treatment in April. Like breast cancer, the fight against thyroid cancer is ongoing.

"I'm going to keep doing CrossFit," she said.

