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Devastated by cancer and the ravages of its treatment at a young age, Justine Kopp has reclaimed her strength and love of life thanks to a YMCA program pioneered by cyclist Lance Armstrong

For Justine Kopp of Port Washington, the LiveStrong program at the Feith Family YMCA in Saukville is more than an exercise and support group for people who are battling or have battled cancer.

“It was life changing,” Kopp said. “It’s not a club you necessarily want to be a part of, but I’m always talking about how amazing this group is and how it changed my life in a way I couldn’t imagine.

“It was an amazing feeling to actually feel alive again and get back to being myself. By giving me the tools, they gave me back that sense of control. It empowers you.”

When she joined the program in February 2011, Kopp could walk on the treadmill for only five minutes.

After seven weeks of working out twice a week with a personal trainer and other LiveStrong members, she was able to walk 15 minutes at a good pace on the treadmill.

By the end of 12 weeks, she was running 15 miles on the treadmill.

Kopp, who played soccer at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, got her competitive spirit back.

She joined the TrY Club with the goal of doing a triathlon.

In July, she completed the Cedarburg Triathlon — a 3-kilometer run, 1/4 mile swim and 10.5-mile bike ride.

“It was the most amazing feeling. I was actually able to finish. I had the endurance and mind-set to do it,” Kopp said.

“The last lap, I grabbed Joah (her youngest son) and finished with him. The children were wonderful. They never complained about all the times I left them in the child care center.”

It was an incredible feeling of triumph for a woman who felt she had lost control over her life when she was diagnosed with an aggressive and highly invasive form of breast cancer in February 2009.

It wasn’t a surprise to Kopp that she got breast cancer — only a surprise that it happened when she was so young and active.

Her mother and an aunt died of breast cancer in their 50s. Another aunt and two cousins are survivors of the disease.

“I knew I had an 80% to 90% chance of getting breast cancer, but I never thought it would be when I was 33,” Kopp said.

“I remembered thinking, ‘I don’t have time for this.’”

An art therapist, she had quit her job to stay home with her sons Jadan and Joah, who were 4 and 18 months at the time, and help her husband Jesse with his wood flooring business.

Kopp underwent a double mastectomy, reconstructive surgeries and high doses of chemotherapy that left her exhausted. Most of 2010 was spent recovering and trying to get her strength back, she said.

“It was frustrating because I wasn’t able to play with my kids and run around like before,” Kopp said.

Her goal for 2011 was to get physically fit. Her oncologist, who had done a triathlon with other cancer patients, challenged her to take part in a similar event.

A friend then told her about the Y’s free LiveStrong program, which was developed by bicyclist and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong. She learned the Y would also provide free child care during the 12-week program.

“That it was totally free was another gift. They’re aware of the financial burdens of cancer,” Kopp said.

“It freed us to focus on ourselves and not worry about the cost.”

Not only did the program help with her physical health, but also mentally.

“I had chemo brain (forgetfulness and confusion sometimes caused by chemotherapy) and the exercise totally helped,” she said. “I can remember a lot better.”

The program provided a new group of friends whose cancer experiences formed the basis for a bond that continued after the program ended.

“The support that this group gave each other was phenomenal even though we all had different cancers,” Kopp said.

The reality of the disease is also present. One member recently sent an e-mail saying she was in hospice care.

The woman gave each LiveStrong member a cutting from her ivy plant, calling it the “ivy of hope.”

While battling her cancer, Kopp relied on her art therapy training to deal with the emotional upheaval.

Before both breasts were removed, she made a plaster cast of her torso with the help of her husband and decorated it. She didnumerous paintings that reflected her mood or what was happening to her.

“Some people keep a journal. My art is my journal,” Kopp said. “That’s how I took care of my emotional state and mental health — through my art. There was a lot of change and loss.

“LiveStrong was the physical component.”

Kopp plans to train for another competition this year, but hasn’t decided which one.

Image Information: Justine Kopp bicycled with the encouragement of Keelyn Lyon, director of the Feith Family YMCA in Saukville.