

Why We Climb: Michelle Lyman, Stage IV Lung Cancer Survivor

When Michelle Lyman was diagnosed with lung cancer in July 2012 at age 45, it seemed like the continuation of a bad dream. Just a few months earlier she had lost her sister, Debbie Williams, to the same disease just seven months after her diagnosis at age 49.

Three months after Williams' death, Lyman saw her doctor, only to discover she had a massive tumor in her lungs and tumors in her brain: stage IV lung cancer. When radiation and chemotherapy failed to keep her cancer from spreading, Lyman was told she was out of treatment options and directed to hospice care.

But that's not how this story ends.

An outdoor activity enthusiast, Lyman had moved to Boise in 1993 to take advantage of the plethora of recreational opportunities the area supports, including her favorites like downhill and cross country skiing, snowshoeing, cycling and rock climbing. She is a mover and a doer, committed to doing what it takes to help others. Upon learning of Williams' diagnosis, Lyman traveled frequently to Portland, OR to help care for her sister and her two children as Williams battled lung cancer.

Lyman started coughing more and gained weight on these trips, symptoms she attributed to stress and enjoying ice cream on the couch in their final months together. The diagnosis of lung cancer just three months after Williams' death left Lyman and her family in utter disbelief. Being told that nothing else could be done only a few months after that was a blow they simply weren't willing to accept.

With the help of her 21-year-old daughter Mikayla, Lyman found her way to the Huntsman Cancer Institute in Salt Lake City, Utah, where she is thriving on the investigational drug Apatinib. The drug is a tyrosine kinase inhibitor that can selectively hinder the vascular endothelial growth factor receptor-2. In laymen's terms, doctors are hopeful it impedes the process by which tumors grow.

Lyman feels great on the drug and experiences very few side effects. Once a month she travels to Salt Lake City to restock her Apatinib supply, and is also screened monthly in Boise. Through it all she works to maintain as normal a life as possible, working full time as a business analyst in IT for St. Luke's Health System and staying as active as she can.

Lyman decided to take on the Fight for Air Climb last year after seeing a news story about the event. At the time she registered, she couldn't walk up half a flight of stairs. But it gave her a goal. Last year she was able to climb 48 floors; this year she's aiming to double that. Stair climbing is no easy task for Lyman who, in addition to her tumor and one lung that works at less than half capacity, also has asthma. She says she will take the stairs slowly, as she handles most physical activity since her diagnosis. "I don't push it. It's like being at very high altitude, very difficult to breathe doing anything physical."

Lyman hopes to share the message that anyone can get lung cancer and you should never ignore your symptoms.

“Pay closer attention to things that aren’t normal,” she advises. “Understand that you don’t have to be living a risky lifestyle in order to develop lung disease. It’s an equal opportunity horrible thing.”

From helping her sister through her battle with lung cancer, Lyman says she “learned how to be better about asking for the help that I needed. Seeing her go through that, I learned to be gentle with myself. To ask for help, and accept it- even when I don’t think I need it.”

Lyman “just radiates courage,” says the American Lung Association’s Idaho State Director Jan Flynn. “It’s a privilege to get to know her through this event.”

Come support Lyman and others with lung disease by joining us on April 26 as we fight for air. The money raised goes towards helping the American Lung Association continue our work to reduce the burden of lung disease and help us breathe clean air through education, advocacy and research.
