

AULTMAN

Brave & Beautiful

Claudia Paone



Claudia Paone of Canton had her retirement plans set. The mother of five grown children would retire from the dental field — a career she began as a senior at Central Catholic High School in 1977 — and join her husband, Rich, on the golf course.

Neither of them really had golfed much, but they had been around the game a lot because of relatives who played. Their daughter-in-law, Christina Paone, is the head coach for Walsh University’s men’s and women’s golf teams.

Claudia, who retired in December 2019 after working as a receptionist in Dr. Bruce Treiber’s dental office for the past 24 years, started taking golf lessons in May 2020. She wasn’t what she would describe as good, but she was finding her swing.

Then, in June 2020, doctors became concerned about a lump on her right breast, and soon medical tests and doctor appointments replaced her time on the fairways.

“My golfing days ceased,” she said.

Diagnosis

Doctors had been monitoring Claudia periodically over the past 10 years. She had dense breast tissue, which can make detecting abnormalities harder, and her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008 at age 80.

Instead of annual mammograms, the doctors would every so often ask Claudia to come back every six months for another test.

It was a six-month checkup in June 2020 when doctors became more concerned about the mass on Claudia’s right breast. On July 1, 2020, the tests confirmed that the mass was Stage 1 breast cancer. A subsequent MRI found a spot of concern in Claudia’s left breast, and a biopsy confirmed the spot was in the earliest form of breast cancer.

After much prayer and consultation with her family, Claudia decided to undergo a double mastectomy on August 5, 2020, just two days before she turned 61.

“As much as I thought I was prepared mentally, I certainly was not,” recalled Claudia, who was familiar with the cancer treatment process because of Rich’s prostate cancer diagnosis roughly six years ago and a friend’s recent breast cancer diagnosis. “The fact that you’re losing body parts was probably the hardest part.”

Three more reconstruction surgeries followed.

Treatment

Because doctors didn’t find signs of cancer in her lymph nodes, Claudia avoided the dreaded chemotherapy and radiation.

But she must take a pill, designed to block the hormones that can feed her type of cancer, for five years. The pill causes pain in Claudia’s hips, especially when she’s sitting for any stretch of time.

“Once I’m in motion, I’m fine,” she said. “If that’s it, then it’s worth it.”

Experience at Aultman

Fortunately for Claudia, her oldest daughter, Amanda Paone, works at Aultman Hospital’s Breast Cancer Center.

“She took me under her wing, and she scheduled all my appointments,” Claudia said. “I didn’t have to think, and I wasn’t thinking. She was doing all the thinking for me.”

Claudia also praised all of the breast cancer center’s doctors, especially Dr. Sabrina Shilad, and the other nurses and staff for the care they gave her.

Closing thoughts

Claudia, now 62, is back on the fairways again. She still won’t call herself a good golfer, but Rich says she often hits the ball straighter than he does.

As she reflects on her breast cancer journey, Claudia encourages everyone to keep up with their recommended screenings, especially mammograms. She also recommends genetic testing.

At Dr. Shilad’s recommendation, Claudia underwent genetic testing and found that she has what’s called a CHEK2 mutation, which can indicate a higher likelihood of developing cancer.

All five of Claudia’s children — Jason Paone, 42, Amanda Paone, 41, Sarah Norton, 39, Brittany Napier, 32, and Brooke Johnson, 29 — also were tested and the results show that each of them has the CHEK2 mutation, as well.

“What that does for my children is it puts them on alert,” she said. “The girls are not going yearly (for mammograms) but more often than that.”

Claudia’s third oldest child, Sarah, was diagnosed with breast cancer in February. At age 38, Sarah, who was diagnosed with blood cancer in late 2020, typically would not have started getting a mammogram for another two years when she turned 40.

“That was pretty hard,” Claudia said. “I wouldn’t want anybody to go through this, especially my kids.”

Watch for Sarah Norton’s story in our Aultman Brave & Beautiful series.

— KELLI WEIR