

Body combat instructor uses fitness to help fight cancer



Rebecca Older from Maidstone was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2014 and underwent a mastectomy followed by radiotherapy and chemotherapy at Maidstone Hospital.

Rebecca is a fitness instructor with the international fitness company, Les Mills, teaching RPM (indoor cycling workout), GRIT (high-impact cardio workout) and

Body Combat classes. Rebecca won the Les Mills 'Instructor of the Year' Award in February 2016, beating off competition from 5,000 other instructors across the UK. Her prize was a trip of a lifetime to New Zealand and, in August 2016, Rebecca travelled to the country's North Island for two weeks.

Here, we talk to Rebecca about her experiences and how she used exercise as a powerful tool to help her cope with the emotional and physical effects of cancer and treatment.

"Exercise has always been a big part of my life even as a child when I loved running and netball," Rebecca said, "I qualified as a fitness instructor in 2009 and I now regularly teach 21 classes a week across Maidstone, Sittingbourne and Medway, including RPM, GRIT and Body combat. My children even come to some of my classes!

"My diagnosis in 2014 showed that the cancer in my breast had spread to my lymph nodes and I underwent six sessions of chemotherapy on the Charles Dickens Unit at Maidstone Hospital. To start with I found chemotherapy very frightening but the staff helped me to overcome my fears and supported me throughout my treatment. As I underwent more treatment I was able to help other patients like me who were also scared of what was to come.

"Exercise is my 'feel good factor' and it was really important to me to keep it up and teach for as long as I could during my treatment. I am lucky to have a strong support network so on the occasions when I wasn't well enough to teach, someone else stepped in to run the class. I had such great support from people attending my classes which meant a lot.

"Through my treatment I took part in events such as 'Race for Life,' an organised walk or run to raise funds for Cancer Research UK, which I led the warm up for and was able to share my story there with the ladies taking part.

"I've now finished treatment but am taking the drug Tamoxifen which is used to help treat hormone receptor-positive breast cancer patients.

“Finding something to give you the ‘feel-good’ factor when you are going through cancer is so important, whether it is exercise or not. I’m now half way through a training course to become a Pilates instructor and I’m excited about the future.”

Rebecca has also been an active fundraiser for cancer charities such as Macmillan Cancer Support and the Peggy Wood Breast Centre at Maidstone Hospital where she underwent a lot of her treatment.

She said: “The work that the team does at the Peggy Wood Centre is so inspirational that I wanted to do some fundraising for them as a way of giving something back. It was actually through reading a copy of ‘Patient First’ that featured a fundraiser’s story, whilst I was waiting for an appointment one day, that motivated me to start fundraising myself!

“I tried to be as positive as I could be when I was going through treatment, and fundraising helped, so I did things like running a sweepstake about what colour my hair was going to be when I it grew back, following treatment. I also did a sponsored body ‘combatathon’ at a local gym to raise funds for charity.

“Winning my ‘Instructor of the Year’ Award meant so much to me and my holiday to New Zealand was one that I will never forget, especially driving a motorhome through some of the world’s most stunning scenery! It was a good chance to reflect on my cancer journey and the challenges I had overcome with the support of my friends, family and the oncology team at Maidstone Hospital.

Rebecca is organising a fundraising event on 14 January at Maidstone Leisure Centre to coincide with the launch of the latest body combat class.

Fact box

World Cancer Day takes place on 4 February 2017.

Currently 8.2 million people die from cancer worldwide each year

More than 50,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer each year in the UK and one in eight women in the UK will develop breast cancer at some point in their lifetime. (Source Breast Cancer Now)

The Kent Oncology Centre run by MTW provides oncology services to Kent, Medway and East Sussex. Brachytherapy is provided at Maidstone Hospital for gynaecological and prostate cancers.

An 18 bedded inpatient haemato-oncology ward provides inpatient treatments for haematological cancers (leukaemia, myeloma, lymphoma).