

[IMAGE]

Fifty States, One Mission

By Brenda Duran

When Jenn Sommermann was diagnosed with stage III ovarian cancer, she was inspired to not only beat the disease herself, but help others beat it as well. Five years later, Jenn is a cancer survivor and triathlete, swimming, biking and running across the country to raise money and awareness – one race and one state at a time.

To be a successful triathlete, you need tenacity, strength and determination to make it to the finish line. Triathlete Jenn Sommermann, 47, possesses all of these traits. To prove it, she has crossed the finish line more than 20 times after swimming, biking and running thousands of miles in nearly a dozen states. She has also placed among the top percentage for her age group at numerous triathlons, acquiring many medals in the process.

However, unlike many triathletes, Sommermann did not learn how to succeed in a triathlon merely by training in a swimming pool or on a paved road; she learned it while fighting ovarian cancer.

Five years ago, at the age of 42, Sommermann, a massage therapist and financial consultant, was on top of the world and eager to conquer the world of triathlons. She was busy getting in the best shape of her life when she received the grim diagnosis that would change everything: stage III ovarian cancer.

sommermann with medal - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Like many women who get diagnosed with ovarian cancer, Sommermann was shocked. She hadn't felt "right" for months, but the symptoms she'd felt were not indicative of cancer, many doctors told her. There was indigestion, a 5-pound weight gain and some fatigue; all vague symptoms that have given ovarian cancer the label of "silent killer."

"It is easy to rationalize the symptoms of ovarian cancer," Sommermann said. "I thought, 'Wow, I'm exhausted, but what woman isn't?' I thought, 'I'm getting older; that explains the weight gain.' I tried to rationalize all of it."

Not satisfied with initial tests from doctors, Sommermann pushed for more answers after feeling her lumpy stomach one day in bed. Doctors eventually found a 6-pound eggplant-sized tumor in her pelvis and within

four days, Sommermann was undergoing a full hysterectomy and chemotherapy, which ultimately eliminated the cancer and saved her life.

"All I was thinking was, 'I want this out, I want this over with and I want to get on and feel better,'" she said. Sommermann had her sights set on getting back to her triathlons and basking in the glory of crossing a finish line with hundreds of other healthy, fit triathletes.

Today, she said she is grateful she's taken on the sport. She even credits it with making her more aware about her body's imbalance.

"Had I not been as fit as I am and had I not had the keen awareness of my body, I think the ovarian cancer could have gone undetected even longer than it did," she said.

The experience of surviving stage III ovarian cancer ended up providing a number of life lessons for Sommermann and made her reflective about other people who might be faced with the same grim diagnosis.

"My mother and I had the conversation and wondered, what's on the other side of this?" said Sommermann. "I am an optimist at my core. I didn't know what was on the other side, but I didn't feel like I was going to die. I knew there was a reason or a message that would come out of this."

The message ended up revealing itself in a triathlon magazine spread Sommermann read on her hospital bed while she recovered from cancer surgery. The teal-colored spread (teal is the official color of ovarian cancer awareness) highlighted efforts by three states to use triathlons to benefit the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund, the largest private funding agency for ovarian cancer research today.

"I am a dangling carrot type of gal, so I thought, 'Wow, that's cool; that's what I want to do when I am well,'" Sommermann recalled.

Spreading the Word

Today, Sommermann is fulfilling that goal. Cancer-free and healthy, she is now helping other women become aware of the reality of ovarian cancer by competing in triathlons. But it's not just a few triathlons she's competing in – it's 50, to be exact. Her goal is to complete 50 triathlons in 50 states by her 50th birthday and raise \$100,000 for the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund (OCRF) in the process.

"No one has to die from this if it's detected early. I have an opportunity, I am able to help and I almost feel an obligation," said Sommermann. "I was spared; there is a reason I was spared. I want to use that for the greater good."

Ovarian cancer is the number-one cause of death due to gynecologic cancers in the United States and the number-five cause of cancer death among women in the U.S., according to the American Cancer Society. Recent research by the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund also emphasizes that only 20 percent of cases are caught before the cancer has spread beyond the ovary to the pelvic region. When ovarian cancer is detected and treated early, the five-year survival rate is greater than 92 percent. However, most patients are diagnosed at advanced stages, and less than 50 percent of women survive longer than five years after diagnosis.

sommermann's photos - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Sommermann calls these statistics "miserable" and "horrendous," and wants to be a key person in helping to change them. At all of the triathlons she participates in, she can be seen talking to both men and women, wearing her OCRF logo-plastered gear and standing beside her teal-colored bike.

"I want to stand out; I want people to say, 'Hey what's with you? Who are you?'" she said. "I am always happy to talk about it."

Sommermann said her pride in being a "mouthpiece" for ovarian cancer comes from knowing she is filling a void of information for a lot of people.

"People want to hear this information," she said. "Even in small and rural places, I am finding that women are hungry for this information. I tell all the women I meet to go home and call five more women they know and tell them about ovarian cancer. We have the opportunity to make an impact in all of these little communities."

Sommermann said she is not only talking to people about looking out for symptoms; she is also letting them know there is a need for a formal screening test, which currently does not exist. Today, the only screening tests doctors are able to use are blood markers for women who are considered "high-risk," primarily because of cancer running in their families. The test, called a blood CA-125 measurement, is used every two years for those high-risk women. There are also transvaginal ultrasounds available upon request.

Sommermann said the problem is that even these tests can provide false positives, while false negatives cannot be counted on for a proper diagnosis. Many cases often are either misdiagnosed or not diagnosed at all. "Right now, they are looking for the one; the be-all test that is needed," she said.

Documenting the Journey

From the first day Sommermann set out on her mission to spread the word about ovarian cancer, she has been hard at work conveying as much information as she can while also documenting it all. Her message has touched people's lives at many of the triathlons she has participated in, and she has set up a blog to prove it. Stories about her journey have been documented on the "Jen Sommermann: Triathlete for a Cure" blog, where her message is stated clearly:

"I race for women who have lost their battle, women who are undergoing treatment and women yet to be diagnosed."

Sommermann said that recently, one woman read her blog and saw her doctor after she read about the symptoms of ovarian cancer. The woman was diagnosed with stage 1 ovarian cancer soon after.

"I always tell people that if you are experiencing any symptoms, persistent symptoms that don't feel like your body, make your doctor prove to you that you do not have ovarian cancer," said Sommermann.

Documenting the journey - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark

On the blog, she also posts YouTube videos regularly, speaking about her experiences. And on her Twitter and Facebook pages, she posts photos of her competing so her supporters – including her husband (her "personal cheerleader") and her mother, both whom have given her great strength along the way, can follow her journey.

So far, all of Sommermann's efforts are paying off. She has been able to raise over \$40,000 for the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund and has the rest of the year planned out. She has 11 states to compete in this summer and plans on doing at least 10 more triathlons in 2012.

She trains seven days a week while also staying busy (an understatement, to say the least) with her multiple jobs. Most of the expenses she incurs are paid out-of-pocket. She is paying all of her race registration fees and other incidental charges, like the \$300 bike shipping charge (per event) to ensure that it is present at

each and every triathlon.

"Usually after a race I pack up my bike and get on a plane, because I have to get to work on Monday," she said. "But it's fine. I am alive and able to do this, so it's great."

Sommermann said she feels she has developed "tenaciousness" after surviving cancer and is grateful the experience has given her a purpose and enough confidence to face the next 29 triathlons with vigor.

"Triathlon is a lifestyle, it's not just a sport, and I really model everything after it," said Sommermann.

"Even chemotherapy was a triathlon. It's an endurance sport. Life is an endurance sport. I use it as a model for everything I do in my life. What I have learned is if you do all the leg work, you will have the inner strength that will carry you through. I feel like I have that. I feel very strong."

To follow Jen Sommermann's journey, visit her blog at www.jennsommermann.blogspot.com.

Ovarian Cancer – Facts and Symptoms

The Facts

ovarian cancer - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Ovarian cancer is a disease in which malignant (cancerous) cells grow in the tissues of the ovary. The ovary is a reproductive organ about the size of an almond, located in a woman's lower abdomen. Ovaries make the female reproductive hormones, estrogen and progesterone, and also make eggs, one of which is released monthly through the fallopian tubes into the uterus.

Ovarian cancer is staged depending on how far the cancer has spread. Ovarian cancer is also graded depending on how the tissue appears under the microscope. The higher the grade, the more likely it is that the cancer will spread.

The Symptoms

- A swollen or bloated abdomen; increased girth. Some women notice that their pants or skirts are getting tight around the waist. The bloating is a sign that fluid, called ascites, is building up in the abdominal cavity in the later stage of the disease
- Persistent pressure or pain in the abdomen or pelvis

- Difficulty eating or feeling full quickly
- Urinary concerns, such as urgency or increased frequency
- Change in bowel habits with new-onset constipation and/or diarrhea
- Unexplained vaginal bleeding

*Any woman may have these symptoms for reasons not related to ovarian cancer. However, if these symptoms are new and unusual, and persist daily for more than two weeks, a woman should see her doctor, preferably a gynecologist, and inquire about ovarian cancer.

Information provided by the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund.

Visit www.ocrf.org to learn more.

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