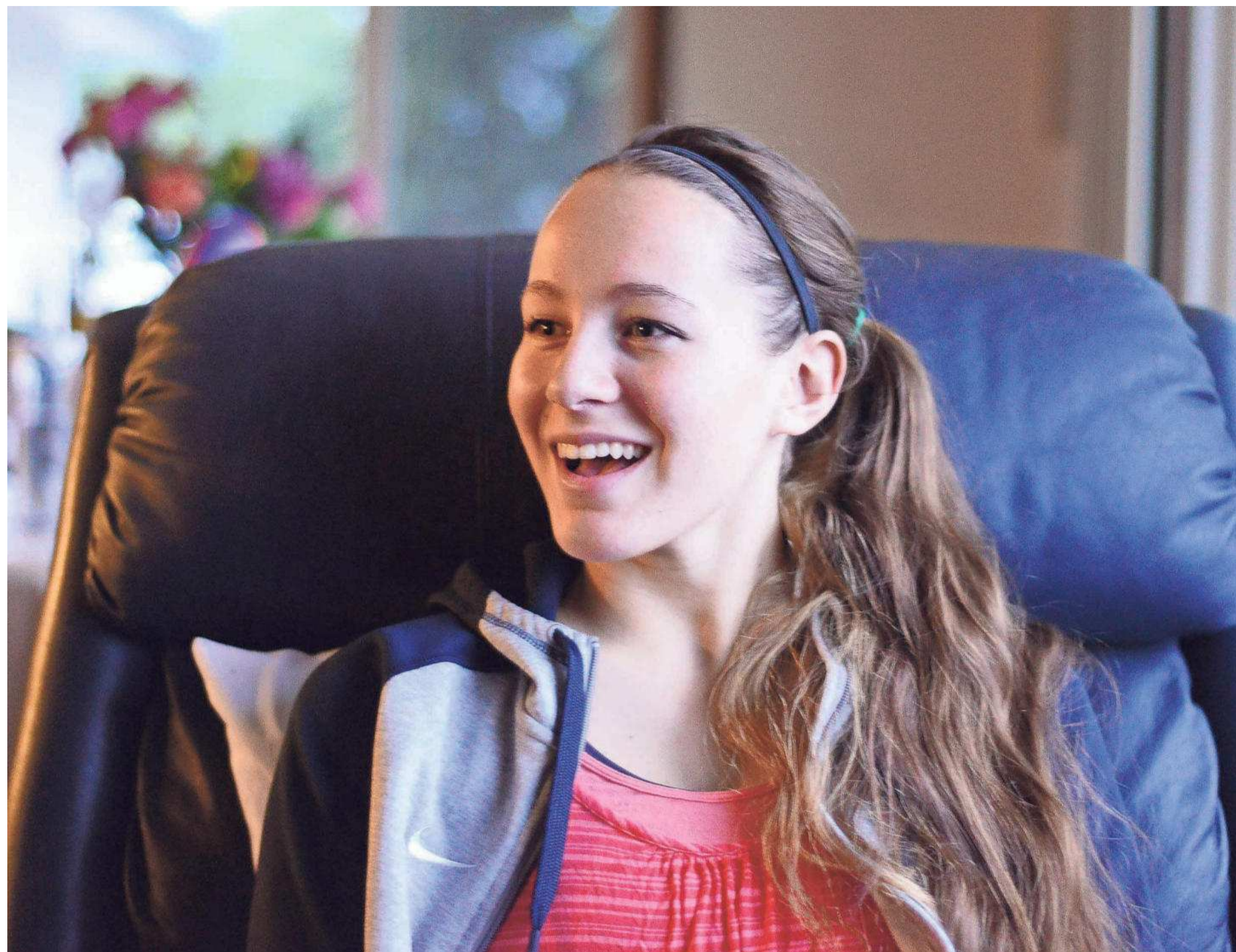


## REMEMBERING ESTHER YBARRA



DANIELLE PETERSON / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Esther Ybarra, then Suelzle, a Cascade High School graduate, seen in this 2014 photo at her home in Aumsville.

# College volleyball player an inspiration beyond athletics

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She had grand plans. She talked about moving to Southern California or Hawaii when she was older to open a surf shop because she liked warm weather, had just tried surfing for the first time and loved it.

But first Esther Ybarra wanted to return to Corban University and go back to playing college volleyball.

Less than a year after being diagnosed with Stage IV cancer, Esther Ybarra – then Esther Suelzle – was on the cusp of what was supposed to be the final round of chemotherapy.

Since her diagnosis in October of 2014, she had undergone a rigorous regimen, and it was working.

Most of her tumors were gone and she was ready to be done with the disease.

She was tired of being the brave face of an illness.

“This has been the most enlightening experience, actually,” she said in 2015. “If I could go back, hindsight is 20/20, I would pick it again.”

“I have become a bigger, better person, I think. Like so many good things have come from this. It’s just been like the grandest adventure that I’ve ever been on.”

Esther Ybarra died at the age of 21 on July 24, 2017 at Oregon Health & Science University in Portland.

A celebration of life will be held at noon Saturday, Sept. 2, at Corban’s Psalm Center.

Corban’s volleyball team will honor her throughout the season. Esther would have been a senior on the team this season so no one will wear her No. 12 jersey – as they haven’t since she first became ill. The team will honor her before its Sept. 8 home match against Northwest.

In the three years between diagnosis and death, she had a roller coaster life.

No matter how good things were – like the span of nearly a year she was in full remission – or how bad the disease affected her in her final days, Esther always maintained a remarkable attitude.

“She was a unique young lady in her ability to communicate, in her ability to relate to people, her drive and motivation,” said her father, Ron Suelzle.

## Devastating diagnosis

A few months into her freshman year at Corban in 2014 – she was playing volleyball after being a three-sport athlete in high school – a vertebrae in Esther’s back collapsed, an injury that led to her being diagnosed with Alveolar Rhabdomyosarcoma.

The rare type of soft-tissue cancer started with a tumor in her arm and by



RON SUELZLE | SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Esther Ybarra and her husband, Jacob, wait for results of a medical test.

the time it was discovered it had ravaged her body.

She underwent a difficult course of treatment including chemotherapy and radiation over the following year and had to withdraw from classes at Corban.

For a girl who had never watched much television – she was usually busy playing three sports at Cascade High School – Esther was suddenly watching entire runs of series like Gossip Girl, How I Met Your Mother, Marvel’s Agents of Shield, Arrow, Revolution, Friends, The Carrie Diaries, Grey’s Anatomy and Saved By The Bell.

By her side was Keoni.

When Esther first found out she had cancer, the one thing she wanted was a German Shephard.

It happened that a friend’s father had a co-worker who had a German Shephard that was having puppies.

The offer of giving her one of the puppies was made, and Esther quickly accepted.

“He’s like my best pal,” she said. “He sleeps in my room and I take him lots of places. When I first got him, I took him everywhere. I took him to the grocery store one time, put him in a cart. He’s really well socialized.”

## In dark times, a bright light

And then she also met the man who would become her husband.

On Jan. 24, 2015, a number of Esther’s volleyball teammates were going to the house of Jacob Ybarra and his roommate

after a Corban basketball game.

“She had been sick for about three months at that time,” said Jacob Ybarra, an All-American track and field athlete at Corban at the time. “Pretty much everyone knew what was going on, her situation and who she was at the school.”

The relationship that started that night across a crowded room began as friends and quickly progressed.

And in September of 2015, Esther was given the news that she was cancer free. “It was nine months of normal,” Jacob Ybarra said.

Six months after she was in remission, she had surgery to install an artificial vertebrae and replace the rods in her back.

It was a surgery she wasn’t looking forward to, but it was a signal she might get back to a normal life.

“She was pretty much told that she would never be a competitive college athlete because of the nature of her injuries,” Ron Suelzle said.

That didn’t stop her desire of wanting to play college volleyball, and she continued going to Corban’s volleyball games as often as she could.

On May 1, 2016, Jacob Ybarra proposed to Esther, and she gladly accepted.

## The cancer returns

While making wedding plans in July, Esther found out the cancer was back. There were new tumors, and this time they were in her lungs.

Esther was put on immunotherapy as

part of a trial and it worked initially.

Jacob and Esther were married Oct. 29, 2016 at Salem Heights Church and moved into a house in Sublimity.

But by December of 2016, the tumors had grown enough that she was removed from the trial. At that point – as she had already been through chemotherapy and radiation – there were no viable treatment options.

And then in April of 2017 she found out she was pregnant.

Esther was having problems breathing and there was fluid building up next to her lung. It got to the point where Jacob could only work a day or two a week in his job with Aflac so he could stay home and care for her.

The cancer had spread so far that it ate through a bone in her leg.

“What happened that really set her back was her femur broke,” Ron Suelzle said.

Two days later, on June 26, she had a miscarriage.

## Staying positive to the end

On June 25, Esther was admitted to Salem Hospital, then transported by helicopter to OHSU. She would never go home again.

There wasn’t much the doctors could do at that point to extend her life.

But before she started taking medication that took out most of her cognitive function, she had her parents and all six of her younger siblings come into the room, gave them each an admonition, a challenge, and a blessing, hugged each and told them she loved them.

“She very much did not want attention on her,” Ron Suelzle said. “She wanted to deflect the attention to God and Jacob and her siblings.”

When Esther was in OHSU in her final days, the hospital gave special permission to allow Keoni to come to the ICU to visit her.

The dog was Esther’s cherished pet and she gifted him to Jacob before she died.

Some people may remember Esther as an athlete or a student, but those people who got to know her will carry on with the memory of her spirit.

“She changed my life completely,” Jacob said. “She made me learn I can love more than I thought I could and I could be a better friend that I thought I could. It’s worth it to be a friend, even if they’re not going to be around.”

Esther is buried at Lone Oak Cemetery in Stayton. Her baby, which she and Jacob named Thaddeus, is buried next to her.

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