

Colon cancer survivor spreading awareness

Tribal Community Health Promotion Specialist Amber Case beat Stage 4 diagnosis

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

You're never "too young" to have colon cancer, but being taken seriously because of age can be an uphill battle.

Grand Ronde Tribal member and Community Health employee Amber Case, 34, knows that well. Despite excruciating lower back pain, abdominal discomfort and fatigue, she says it was a challenge to get an accurate diagnosis.

"When I was going through all of my pain and symptoms, in and out of emergency rooms, I was brushed off as possibly being 'pain seeking,'" she says. "It didn't come down to a diagnosis until I was rectally bleeding. Being considered a young and healthy person and never getting answers, it was tough."

That was two years ago. After grueling multiple rounds of chemotherapy and surgery, Case has been in remission for six months and is now a strong advocate for education and screening. She hopes that sharing her story with others will help them avoid the ordeal she endured.

"As a stage four survivor, there is an 80 percent chance that colon cancer will return so I need to remain vigilant," she says. "The next time, it won't be a surgery and removal. It will mean a colostomy bag. ... Colon cancer is on the rise and statistics in Native Americans are more than 50 percent higher at risk increase. ... We owe it to ourselves to take the best care of ourselves."

Case set up a display in the Tribal Health & Wellness Center atrium as a part of Colon Cancer Awareness Month, which is March. The display contains informational pamphlets and facts about colon cancer, symptoms and diagnosis. The background is blue, which is the color of colon cancer awareness.

"It is easy to put the blame elsewhere when you are going through treatment, but I asked, 'What am I learning from this experience and



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Community Health Promotion Specialist Amber Case, left, talks with Tribal Elder Ruby Golden at the colon cancer informational display Case set up in the Health & Wellness Center atrium on Friday, March 2. March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month and Case is a stage four colon cancer survivor.

how can I help raise awareness?' I am an optimist by default," Case says.

After treatments and surgery for colon cancer ended, Case applied for the job as Community Health specialist with the Tribe, where she works primarily with clients managing their diabetes.

"I really believe in prevention and it starts with awareness," she says. "When I learned about this position, I really felt like this is where I am supposed to be."

Two months after her colon cancer diagnosis in 2016, Case was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and underwent a full hysterectomy and chemotherapy.

She has been in remission from both cancers for six months. After first being diagnosed with stage four colon cancer, doctors gave her a one in 10 chance of survival.

"That's a big burden to carry, but I thought that this was something Creator thought I was strong enough to learn from," Case says. "Never think of it as, 'Why is this

happening to me?' Think of it as, 'What is this trying to teach me?' My self life motto is to inspire and effect."

As a foster child, Case didn't know her family health history, which she said was a huge barrier to getting a proper diagnosis. Genetic testing, which involves a blood draw, can be done for breast, ovarian, colon and thyroid cancers, according to cancer.net.

"This is a hereditary condition," Case says. "It's not rare, it's just not talked about."

While Case was sharing information at the clinic atrium on Friday, March 2, she was humbled by the number of fellow employees from various departments who stopped by her table.

"It means the world to me that they support me and being able to give back like this is my way to say thanks," she says. "My hope is to get providers on board with recognizing these symptoms of young onset colon cancer. I want to bring more awareness, whether it's our environment, food choices or getting more exercise. What can we do?"

She shares statistics from a 2017 survey conducted by the Colorectal Cancer Alliance of survivors younger than 50. These include:

- Sixty-one percent said they experienced financial difficulties due to the cost of their cancer treatment.
- Seventy-three percent were diagnosed at an advanced stage of the disease (stage three or four).
- Sixty-five percent had to take a leave of absence or quit a job or school because of their diagnosis.
- Seventy-nine percent experienced anxiety or depression during or after treatment, or both, but only 42 percent said they sought treatment or are currently seeking treatment.
- The top three symptoms respondents experienced that led them to visit a medical professional

were blood in their stool, diarrhea/constipation or consistent cramps.

During Case's treatment, Tribal employees hosted fry bread fundraisers, Health & Wellness Clinic Dr. Marion Hull made house visits, and employees dropped by with food and care packages. Others donated weeks of paid time off. Case's then-supervisor, Christa Hosley, guided her through the process of requesting disability leave and advocated for her time off.

"The end result of all that was to give back to work," Case says. "It's a really good sense of community."

She is also grateful to Tribal Elders for all of their support.

"When my hair started growing back in, they told me they had prayed for every hair on my head," Case says. "It is huge to me to know that despite their pain, they still get up and go. To have that support, to see them lead by example, is important."

Growing up, Case lived in 14 foster homes across Oregon, but always felt like she had a foundation in Grand Ronde when she would visit for medical appointments.

"I knew no matter how far I wandered, I always had a home here," she says.

Her biological father, Clifford Wills Case Jr., was a writer and Case says he always emphasized that part of moving forward and surviving is sharing experiences with the younger generation.

"I am an auntie and want to continue that and keep it a priority to put ourselves and our health first," she says. "Prevention starts with awareness and we owe it to ourselves and our ancestors."

Case encourages those who believe they may have colon cancer to be advocates for themselves.

"I was told many times that it was all in my head," she says. "But you know your own body better than anyone. Someone is going to hear you. Don't give up." ■

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