

## Looking ahead in the face of metastatic breast cancer diagnosis

Patient strives to focus on positives, connect with others

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Amanda Cowan/The Columbian LIKELY COVER Sonja Trytko (Amanda Cowan/The Columbian)

Sonja Trytko sought help at an urgent care clinic when she felt intense pain in her chest. The doctor sent her for a CT scan to rule out a blood clot. The diagnosis was a surprise: Trytko, then only 38, learned she had metastatic breast cancer.

Trytko had been previously diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer in 2011, at 31, while she was living in New York City. At that fateful urgent care visit in 2018, she learned that the cancer had returned and spread to her bones. She decided to move back to Portland to be with family.

“The first six months after my second diagnosis were really tough,” she said. “It wasn’t just the diagnosis. I left a life behind, a career behind. I left my friends behind.”

Trytko lived in New York City for 12 years before her metastatic diagnosis. She enjoyed the city’s energy, opportunities, the variety of people and the little hole-in-the-wall Italian places in Queens.

“I love the city so much,” she said. “But going through cancer a second time without my family close by was just going to be too difficult at that point. It felt very important for me to come home.”

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Coping with a metastatic diagnosis was tough for Trytko, even though she considers herself an optimistic person. When she first learned she had stage 4 cancer, she immediately asked her oncologist: “What’s my prognosis?”

“She looked at me and said, ‘It would be irresponsible to answer that question. Really, we don’t know how this is going to go,’ ” Trytko recalled.

Her oncologist said she’s seen patients with the exact same diagnosis live just a few months while others live decades longer.

Trytko felt frustrated. She wanted to plan ahead.

“At the time, I didn’t know how powerful her statement was,” Trytko said. “That was probably one of the best things that could’ve happened to me.”

She said it took a weight off her shoulders. Without a prognosis, she was not left counting down days.

### Building community

After recovering from the shock of her metastatic diagnosis, Trytko decided to focus her energy on something productive. She connected with the Portland-based chapter of Susan G. Komen and became an ambassador for the organization. When [Komen closed its regional chapters in 2021](#), the Vancouver-based Pink Lemonade Project took over many of its local initiatives, including the [dinner series for metastatic patients](#) Trytko attended.

Trytko said the quarterly dinner series gives those with metastatic breast cancer their own community.

“Breast cancer patients tend to get lumped together as ‘survivors,’ ” said Trytko, now 42. “But when you’re metastatic, there isn’t necessarily an option of survivorship.”

She said she has appreciated the chance to speak candidly with other stage 4 patients. She said it’s also nice to just get together with people without talking about cancer all the time — but instead about family, trips, relationships, goals and life.

There’s also a darker reality to the metastatic breast cancer group. Sometimes when members don’t show up, it’s because they died.

“You kind of just take that moment where you’re like, ‘Oh, that’s another one of ours that passed away today,’ ” Trytko said. “And those moments are really hard. But overall, life goes on.”

Trytko focuses on her job for a construction company, which she enjoys. She attends to her health. She eats a balanced diet and lifts weights.

So far, medication has held Trytko’s cancer in check. She took the hormone-therapy pills Ibrance and letrozole until January. Now she takes Lynparza, a PARP inhibitor, which prevents cancer cells from repairing their damaged DNA so they die. While the hormone therapy caused Trytko to gain weight and lose hair, the PARP inhibitor has been easier to tolerate.

“I’ve been very fortunate,” Trytko said.

Trytko also sees a counselor. She chooses to read the news, not watch it, to bring her anxiety down, and tries to limit her social media use.

But her biggest suggestion to others who might be struggling is to have fun — and to look ahead.

“I’m hopeful for the future in terms of planning my life,” she said. “I’m just living a normal life as much as possible for as long as I can.”