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BREAST-CANCER SURVIVOR

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ALISON CHAVEZ

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RUNS AT THE BACK OF THE PACK,

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BUT SHE IS A CHAMPION.

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BY ARIELLA GINTZLER

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PHOTOS BY HOWIE STERN

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FIFTEEN MINUTES AFTER CROSSING THE FINISH LINE OF THE 2016 LEONA DIVIDE 50 IN LAKE HUGHES, CALIFORNIA, ALISON CHAVEZ IS STANDING ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD SPILLING GALLON JUGS OF WATER OVER HER HEAD. SHE HAS TAKEN OFF HER FINISHER'S MEDAL, "F*CK CANCER" TRUCKER HAT AND HOT-PINK TANK TOP, AND AIMS THE WATER STRATEGICALLY AT HER ARMS, FACE AND NECK. HER FINISHING TIME OF 11 HOURS 48 MINUTES 7 SECONDS WAS A PERSONAL RECORD, BUT HER DAY IS FAR FROM OVER.



Towel-drying her reddish-brown pixie cut, she scoots into the back seat of her car, where she exchanges sopping polypropylene for a rented evening gown, black and floor-length. In an hour she is due at a charity benefit dinner on Hollywood's Sunset Strip, a facet of her job as a TV production attorney. She checks her face in the rear-view mirror, adding earrings and a quick smear of lipstick, and then wiggles her feet into a pair of heels.

It's hard to tell that just three years ago, Chavez was in the midst of one of the toughest battles anyone faces in their lifetime. She was 36 when she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. Despite surgeries and chemo treatments that left her too weak to walk up a flight of stairs, she refused to give up running. Now two

"Going through law school, and working as an attorney in New York City, taught me a lot about how to endure," she says. She worked long hours, sometimes through the night. "If I went to the gym once a week, I thought I was being so healthy."

Then, in 2005, seeking a more relaxed lifestyle, she moved back to southern California, and put her corporate finance experience to work as an attorney in the Hollywood television and film industries. To make friends, she joined Team In Training, a marathon and triathlon team that raises money for Leukemia and lymphoma. She finished her first half-marathon in the spring of 2005, and, over the course of the next five years, went on to complete 15 half-marathons, nine marathons, two Ironman races

wouldn't have noticed had it not been for the stinging sensation that had been nagging at her armpit for several hours. Panicked, she made a doctor's appointment for the following Monday.

"First I had a mammogram, then an ultrasound, then a biopsy," she says. "I knew something was seriously wrong, because the doctors kept going to the next step." On July 8, she received her diagnosis: triple negative invasive ductal carcinoma.

Treatment for her cancer would entail surgery and chemotherapy. "I didn't know what an oncologist even did," says Chavez. "I didn't know what chemo was—you could have told me it was like a suntan booth."

Oncologist Dr. Maurice Berkowitz assured Chavez that her cancer was treatable, but

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years cancer free, she has earned two 100-mile finishes and hopes to prove that endurance sports are attainable even for those who are facing, or who have faced, serious illness.

"Running and cancer are so intertwined for me," she says. "Without running, I don't know how I would have made it through cancer treatment. Without cancer, I don't know if I would have had the drive to do all of these 100-mile races, to do the impossible."

Growing up in southern California, Chavez was never the outdoorsy type. She swam competitively through high school, but according to her mother, Beth, "She was the little girl who didn't even want to get dirty." A straight-A student, Chavez attended Whittier College, and then moved to New York City to earn her graduate degree from NYU Law School. Her ambition was all consuming. She became an attorney in 2001, and stayed in New York to work for a large corporate firm, where she specialized in finance law.

and five Half-Ironman races.

By 2010, Chavez's growing interest in endurance sports led her to the SoCal Coyotes, a local trail-running club. Chavez immediately clicked with the down-to-earth atmosphere of the group runs. Many of the Coyote club members were ultra veterans, and she found herself in awe of what seemed like a virtually impossible feat: running 100 miles.

Chavez's weekly trail runs with the SoCal Coyotes quickly morphed into a full-on trail-running obsession. She embraced the challenge of tackling harder, longer distances, completing her first 50K in 2010 and her first 50-miler in 2012. Soon, she found herself ready to attempt the impossible, the Tahoe Rim Trail Endurance Run (TRT 100), slated for July 20, 2013.

On a Friday evening in late June 2013, Chavez was getting ready to leave work when she discovered a lump on the side of her left breast. It was no bigger than a pea—so small she

they would have to act fast.

"This type of cancer is very aggressive," says Dr. Berkowitz. "It requires much stronger chemotherapy than other kinds of breast cancer, and tends to relapse more quickly. That said, it also has a high survival rate." The plan was to shrink the tumor using chemotherapy, followed by a mastectomy and then several more rounds of chemotherapy.

Then doctors made a treatment-altering discovery: Chavez tested positive for BRAC-1, a gene famously known for giving its female carriers a predisposition to cancer. Chances were good that her other breast would get cancer within three years, as would her reproductive organs. To minimize that risk, Chavez opted to schedule a double mastectomy as well as surgery to remove her uterus, ovaries, cervix and fallopian tubes.

Just two weeks later, the start of the TRT 100 loomed. But a determined Chavez decided to go



ahead and toe the start line (with Dr. Berkowitz's approval).

The tumor had already grown to the size of a hardboiled egg. "You could actually see [the tumor] poking out of my chest," she says.

Inexperience in dealing with the low points of a 100-miler, coupled with the emotional weight of her diagnosis, says Chavez, led her to drop at 2 a.m., at mile 67.7.

"She didn't want to quit," says Chavez's coach and running partner Andy Noise. "But she knew she needed to quit."

Four days later she received her first dose of chemotherapy.

Beth Chavez sums her daughter up in one word: Sunshine. "It's her real, given middle name," she says. "How could I ever have known it would be so fitting?" Asked to describe Chavez, friends all come up with a combination of the same words: bubbly, positive, genuine, smiling and friendly.

"Alison is one of those A-list people," says Chimera 100 race director Steve Harvey. "She's got one of those smiles that lights up the room. People are attracted to her. If Alison is signed up to be at your race, it's good day."

After fully embracing trail running, Chavez was at a race almost every weekend, and, if she wasn't racing, she was crewing or volunteering. She would often show up in costume, sometimes with party favors to hand out at the aid stations and always with a smile on her face.

Naturally tough and stubborn, Chavez took the same positive approach to cancer treatment that she did for trail running. During chemo appointments, she danced around her intravenous pole, took funny pictures and posted them to social media. As much as possible, she ran.

"I had worked for three years to [be able to run] ultra distances," she says. "I didn't want to end up after cancer treatment having to start from ground zero." For the first several months of treatment, Chavez maintained a running volume of 25 to 40 miles a week. As surgery and chemo began to take their toll, she defaulted to simply running whenever she was able to.

Chavez also continued to volunteer at aid stations. When she was too weak to volunteer, she simply pulled up a chair and cheered for her friends. One March morning at the mile-15 aid station of the 2014 Coyote Cohorts

Backbone Trail Ultra, coach Noise recalls catching Chavez carting whole watermelons from her car. "I practically yelled at her to sit down," he says.

Despite appearances, the chemo side effects were brutal. From December 2013 through January 2014, Chavez endured eight rounds of Dose Dense Adjuvant Chemo, a treatment known more colloquially as "The Red Devil." The Devil came every two weeks, in a plastic syringe filled with bright red liquid.

"I was like a walking corpse," she says. "I was still running, but, in my head, I looked really sick and pale."

In between crippling nausea, vomiting, depression and panic attacks induced by the Devil, Chavez also attended hot-yoga and spin classes. A December 13 entry from her journal, which she regularly posted on Facebook, reads, "I still feel nauseous [after today's chemo]; however my doctor said most people don't start to feel really awful (bone pain, nausea, hot flashes) for a few more hours. Maybe I can sneak in a run [...] before I start to feel really bad."

Afraid that taking too much sick time would hurt her career, Chavez chose to continue to work throughout



Chavez sports a signature smile on a trail run near Inspiration Point on the Angeles Crest 100 course.

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her cancer treatment. “I didn’t want to appear weak or sick,” she says. She took off every Wednesday to receive her chemo infusions, often lugging a purse full of chargers and extension cords so she could answer emails while the chemicals dripped into her veins.

The rest of the week, she worked 10 to 12 hours a day. As a TV-production attorney, says Chavez, “You are answering emails and drafting documents as fast as humanly possible, from the moment you walk in the door to the moment you leave.” She timed the chemo treatments so that

the worst symptoms would hit over the weekend. Still, she spent many mornings throwing up into a plastic grocery bag while her mom drove her to work, and often locked her office door midday to nap on the floor.

From February through July 2014 she endured five surgeries, as the incisions from her breast implants kept opening up and getting infected. The result was a mounting pile of medical debt that her insurance wouldn’t cover.

“A single chemo treatment costs \$4,000,” says Chavez. “Hospital stays were \$8,000 to \$10,000 per night.”

By the end of treatment, Chavez’ personal debt was close to \$100,000.

“I went from being a very successful attorney to a very broke attorney,” she says. Continuing to work was no longer just a matter of career advancement—it was the only way she could manage to pay back her medical debt. To save money, she gave up her apartment and bounced between her parents’ house and friends’ guest rooms.

Chavez’s final procedure, on July 14, 2014, was an eight-hour, multi-surgeon affair to insert a final set of permanent breast implants and



TOP: Hugging her mother at the finish line.
LEFT: Chavez proudly displays her bib for the 2016 Angeles Crest 100, which she finished two years after cancer treatment.

remove her uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes and cervix. That week several of her friends were running California's Angeles Crest 100 (AC100), a notoriously difficult and technical race. Too weak to cheer them on in person, Chavez went online and signed herself up for the 2015 race.

Within four months of her final surgery, Chavez was back to trail racing, and quickly worked her way up from 16K to 30K to 50K. In December 2014, she ran 100 miles at the Across the Years 48 hour race. In February she finished the Sean O'Brien 50-miler in 12 hours, a personal best by one and a half hours.

"That was a huge breakthrough race," says Noise. "At that point, I thought, 'Oh, my, it's on.'"

Chavez began spending large amounts of time on the AC 100 course, and, on August 1, 2015,

lined up for the race start.

"A lot of people warned me that it was too much, too soon," she says. "Nine months of training might have been plenty to get a healthy runner ready for AC100, but not a runner whose body had been through the trauma mine had." Chavez felt strong, but lacked speed. She dropped at mile 75.

"She trained for it well," says Noise. "But she had only been training for about six months. She was like a great car that ran out of gas."

But redemption came quickly. On November 14, 2015, she finished California's Chimera 100, her first official 100-mile race.

"I went into Chimera a bit calmer," she says. Having already been through the toughest part of a 100-miler—the nighttime—she knew that if she could make it to daylight, she could finish. Temperatures dropped so low that she ran in a fur-collared ski suit.

"Every piece of ground looked like an inviting bed," she says. But she resisted, and kept moving to the finish line.

"When she crossed the finish line, she ran straight at me, gave me a hug, then broke down and started crying," says race director Steve Harvey. "Those of us who knew Alison were crying, too."

With a Western States qualifier under her belt, Chavez figured she would enter the lottery, and wait a few years until her turn came up. Then, at a friend's urging, she entered herself in a Strava contest to win a free Western States bib. "I felt like I had already been blessed with so much support," she says. "I almost didn't enter the contest, because I didn't feel like I needed to win to be happy." She got an email a few weeks later, informing her she had been selected.

"I was in shock," she says. "I just kept thinking, 'Pinch me, I'm dreaming.' [Western States] is like our Olympics. I was just chosen to be in the Olympics, which is insane because I'm not a pro." Already signed up for a second shot at that summer's Angeles Crest 100, she simply increased her training, with a focus on speed and stamina. When Western weekend rolled around, she treated herself and her crew to the nicest hotel in Squaw Valley.

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From the start, her only goal was to finish. She raced smoothly until around mile 40, when intestinal troubles began to set in. A comfortable two-hour cushion against the cutoff quickly shrank to one hour, then a half hour and then 15 minutes. By the time she reached Michigan Bluff aid station at mile 55.7 she was just under the aid-station cutoff, and well behind the overall 30-hour race cutoff.

"She scared the hell out of us," says Harvey, who crewed for Chavez. "But looking at her, you would never know she was toying with cutoffs the whole way. She was all business, and all smiles." When she and her pacer Chris Jones arrived at the mile-75 river crossing, Chavez still had enough energy left to laugh and sing along with volunteers as they strapped on her life vest.

"I'm freezing my balls off," Jones griped as they dipped

in to cross the river.

"I would say I'm freezing my ovaries off," Chavez responded. "But I have no ovaries!"

By mile 85, though, Chavez admits she was starting to panic. "I was so nervous that I was going to get to the track, and they were going to ring the cutoff bell before I made it to the finish line," she says.

"She was practically sleep walking," says Jones. They reached Highway 49, the 93.5-mile marker, four minutes before the aid-station cutoff, and pushed to gain 10 minutes on the clock by No Hands Bridge. But 10 minutes wasn't necessarily enough of a cushion to get through the final climb up to Robie Point at mile 98.5.

"I knew we had a shot of getting in under the cutoff," said Jones. "But I also knew that the last steep part was coming, it was getting hotter and Alison was getting more dehydrated by the minute." She was sweating

profusely, and had stopped eating. Jones fed her sips of water every 15 seconds.

As the trail steepened, she summoned the energy to run for a few hundred feet. Then she walked. Then she ran some more. "That was the difference maker," says Jones. When Chavez got to Robie Point, she had gained a 30-minute cushion for the last 1.4 miles. Jones predicted that she would make it to the track with 12 or 13 minutes to spare. "Estimate three minutes to enjoy your victory lap around the track" says Jones. "You'll finish with time to spare."

Too delirious and panicked to be convinced, Chavez simply burst into tears. "Only three minutes to run the track? I need four minutes," she pleaded. "Can I please have four minutes?" She only needed two.

Ariella Gintzler is the assistant editor at Trail Runner.

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