

Dennis Smalls is a retired veteran who served for 22 years in the military. He is a loving husband with a beautiful wife and two wonderful kids. He is an advocate for the American Cancer Society. He is a passionate personal trainer, a great friend and an amazing human being who refuses to allow his illness to confine or define him. In fact, Smalls may just be

CANCER'S MOST FORMIDABLE OPPONENT

By KimberMarie Faircloth

I read it again and again...about three or four times." Dennis Smalls, 52, a personal trainer at Gold's Gym on Folly Road described a defining moment in his fight against breast cancer. From a young age, Smalls was taught the Psalms 23: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." This recitation revealed its true meaning to Smalls during a moment of fervent prayer.

Being diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer and discovering it has spread to your lungs, your ribs and nine of your vertebrae certainly seems like the valley King David was describing. But Smalls has no fear. For him, it is more than just a personal fight; it is one that compels him to incorporate his faith with the people around him. "Cancer is so much more than just one person," Smalls said. He decided years ago that his fight is worth talking about and teaching to the masses because he knows just how

difficult it can be to be diagnosed with cancer.

Entering into his fifth chemotherapy treatment, Smalls has been through what many go through when experiencing cancer: loss of hair and weight, as well as other symptoms that combined can lead to a devastating loss of confidence as well. In 2009, before a race Smalls was planning to compete in, he discovered a lump underneath his left nipple. "I know my body...I knew

it was bigger than that,” he said, explaining how he knew the lump was definitely abnormal. Even though it was not painful and there was no leakage or discoloration, he knew something was wrong because he knew his body.

In April, he received his diagnosis of a stage IV infiltrating ductile carcinoma (IDC); his second opinion also revealed to him the spread of cancer to five of his vertebrae and also to his blood stream, which is an indicator that the cancer can be volatile. Smalls immediately started his treatment and is one of the youngest males at The MUSC Hollings Cancer Center who has breast cancer. He has endured mammograms, biopsies under his armpit and from his lungs, along with painful spinal taps. Just recently he had a double port installed to keep the medication from burning his veins by injection. He is now dealing with neuropathies, where feelings are lost in the hands and feet.

Amid the needles and treatments, Smalls has not allowed himself to be defined by his cancer or the discomfort: “These things are painful, but pain only lasts for a short time.” Shortly after his first chemotherapy treatment, he asked his doctor when he would be able to go to the gym. Incredulous, the doctor told him he could go soon but that he might feel weakness or fatigue. Smalls would not have it. “Do not let cancer define you...people will tell you ‘chemo is going to make you tired’ but if you like working in your garden, when you get home...work in your garden.” He advises other cancer patients to take precautions with being out in the sun but above all to “keep doing things as you normally do.”



Dennis Smalls training Julie Kinzie at Gold's Gym in James Island.
(If interested in inquiring about training with Dennis, you can call Gold's Gym at 843.853.4653.)

Smalls's advice is not just for those enduring cancer or those who have survived it but also for those who might not even have it yet. Over the years, he noticed that people—men especially—are not necessarily proactive about getting checked professionally for abnormal occurrences. The biggest part of the fight is knowing who or what you are fighting, which cannot be done until people go get checked. “Me and my doctor became best friends... let them know what is going on,” Smalls advised. “Ask the questions...ask the questions you don't want to ask.”

His own personal challenge was fueled by his desire to not look sick. Empowered by prayer and his own natural confidence, Smalls set out to not let the cancer take over his looks, his fitness or his courage. His workouts are centered on healing himself “physically and emotionally,” as well as a serving as a time for meditation. Smalls is curious whenever he has to start new treatment, not necessarily to know

how quick it will work this time around or how much the cancer the treatment will eradicate but rather what the side effects will be. When Smalls is told that the medicine is going to make him weak, his mindset becomes “no it is not.” He is a fighter to the core but above all, Smalls wants people to know that doing nothing is the wrong answer.

Smalls is built for this race, this fight against cancer. His positivity and charisma has spread into the community, especially with his passion for Dragon Boat Charleston, an association created to bring together cancer patients, cancer survivors and healthy paddlers alike. Smalls found out about the club while doing chemotherapy at the same center as one of the coaches. After trying it out for the first time, he realized it was an instant match. Inspired by the strong women going through the same battle he was, Smalls found a way to let his athletic skill and his influential strength shine. Paddling in a boat with 24 other

people with various personalities and perspectives is an empowering experience because everyone, at that moment, is there for the same goal. This can be a breath of fresh air for those who are going through a personal fight, which cancer is. These moments of connection motivate Smalls to believe that “if there is a point where you are not strong enough, surround yourself with people who are.”

One of the main mottoes for Dragon Boat Charleston and Smalls both is “believing in each other and healing through wellness and fitness but also through community.” Exuding this mentality, Smalls continues to exercise rigorously, and it shows—he does not look like a sick patient but rather like a strong and vibrant man. The community he has built around himself has allowed his fight for health to be much easier—the combination of family, supportive friends and intelligent doctors has thoroughly made a difference. It is a recipe for success to nourish Smalls with the support he will need for the long path ahead to remission.

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—Dennis Smalls

At the end of the day, though, it comes down to who Smalls is as a person. Even within a half-hour interview, he displays an inspiring and life-changing mentality that is hard to match. Smalls proclaims, “Cancer does not care if you are a Democrat or a Republican; it does not care if you have a master’s degree or a bachelor’s degree or a PhD. Cancer does not care if you are black or white because it has a way

of swiping every denomination.” Regardless of what you look like, what you believe in or where you come from, cancer can infiltrate, which is why Smalls sincerely promotes getting checked regularly and being honest with yourself. Above all, he believes people need to “learn to love themselves. Love who you are...sometimes we can get to be sixty or seventy years old and never learn how to be satisfied with ourselves.”

Smalls is not a cancer patient; he is a retired veteran who served for 22 years in the military. He is a loving husband with a beautiful wife and two wonderful kids. He is an advocate for the American Cancer Society. He is a passionate personal trainer, a great friend and an amazing human being all around. Cancer has not confined or defined Dennis Smalls, not in the least.

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