

LAGUNA BEACH

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Magazine

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TEEMU SELANNE

Fearless Fashionista

Laguna Beach resident Donna McNutt uses Instagram to share her cancer journey while also inspiring others to find an outlet for expression and healing.

BY THERESA BOEHL

In 2015, Donna McNutt was living a charmed life. The mother of three adult children shared her dream Laguna Beach cottage with her husband, Jack, and spent her time volunteering at Casa Teresa, which provides support for pregnant women.

Then, without warning, everything changed. After an evening out dancing with Jack at Marine Room Tavern—the couple’s Friday night ritual—she woke up with rib pain that didn’t subside, even after a few weeks.

“Now, I look back and I can clearly see that I was deteriorating,” McNutt says.

Her condition worsened, and one morning, after not having the strength to do her favorite thing—get dressed—she

decided she’d had enough. She went straight to the hospital and ultimately received a diagnosis that she never expected: stage 4 multiple myeloma.

Through the years of tests and treatment that followed, McNutt took to Instagram to share her personal experience with this rare blood cancer through the lens of fashion, style and creativity. From eye-catching shoes, vibrant jackets and a plethora of handbags to effortlessly cool poses, McNutt’s account, @thecancerfashionista, imparts a message of lighthearted positivity against all odds.

Read on to learn about her journey and the role that her love for fashion has played in it.

Donna McNutt, also known as The Cancer Fashionista



Laguna Beach Magazine: Tell us about your journey with multiple myeloma.

Donna McNutt: I went into remission after a stem cell transplant in October of 2015. But ... I have an incurable cancer. [I thought] there was a beginning, a middle and an end of the story. I didn’t even realize going into my transplant that I would always have to be in treatment. I’m currently doing immunotherapy and I’m also doing neurotherapy [and] chemotherapy, and I do steroids along with that. That’s the world of multiple myeloma: It’s a beast that’s constantly reinventing itself.

LBM: What inspired you to start sharing your journey on Instagram?

DM: I became The Cancer Fashionista in all of this with my transplants—I told the story the way I wanted to tell the story. I never wore a hospital gown. From the very beginning, I wanted to show people what I have on every day. My whole mission was, “I’m fighting cancer, one outfit at a time.” And I want my Instagram to be super authentic. I have never worn anything that someone’s given me. I’m not an influencer. I am a woman with cancer.

LBM: Have you always been interested in fashion?

DM: I was a child who learned not from books,

but from looking out into the world, and what grabbed my attention was how people wore their clothes. I have a sister who’s a year apart from me, we’re like Irish twins—we were sharing the same room. She was reading every night in bed and I was organizing an outfit. I probably missed homework assignments and things [like that,] because I was determined that, if I had three pieces of clothing in my closet, I was going to put some other spin on them.

LBM: How has your social media helped you deal with your cancer diagnosis and treatment?

DM: It’s what has kept me alive. I have an enormous, close, extended family. What was the only way they were going to see that I was going to be OK—especially my children? I’d just have my husband snap a picture before I went to chemo and I would send it out. It’s like, “Look, I’m in this cute skirt today!”

LBM: From where do you draw inspiration for your fashion choices?

DM: I’ve never been inspired by clothes that are wearing people—I’ve always been inspired by people wearing clothes. I can spot the difference. But, really, I draw inspiration from someone doing



Donna McNutt, pictured with her nurses (top) and showcasing fabulous shoes during testing (bottom)

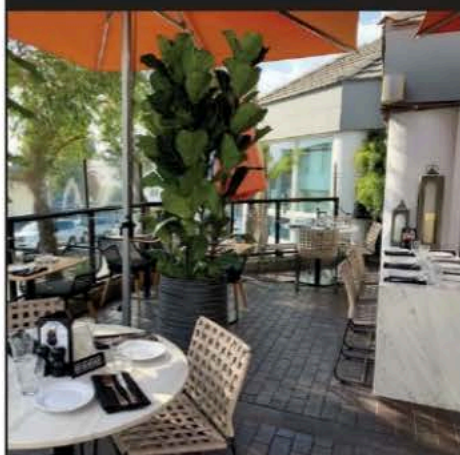
something confidently. I'm 60 now. I wasn't a part of having images that are manufactured on websites and things. So we studied from the real thing.

LBM: Your Instagram shows you wearing fabulous shoes on days when you're going for tests. How did this start?

DM: I've always loved shoes. I have so many procedures and, darn it, you get to look down at cute shoes. That's really how that started—because that would be something natural for me anyway, to pick out a pair of shoes. It gave me freedom. Even the technicians and doctors would start to notice. And when I walked in the door, that's the first thing [they'd say]—"What does she have on today?"

LBM: What tips do you have for other cancer patients on staying positive through adversity?

DM: I think the biggest thing I want to share with [other] patients is that you have to be confident in your care—seek that specialist in whatever [your] journey is. The second thing is, however this looks for you, you need some type of support. I think it's so important to find a person or a group that you can unload to, because it's helped me tremendously finding that balance. **LBM**



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