Grateful son honors his mother’s breast cancer survival

Austin Smith is a freshman honors student at Sacramento State who takes Breast Cancer Awareness Month (October) very personally. His mother was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer eight years ago and was given six months to live.

Smith’s commitment is so intense that for the past three years, during October, he has shaved the word “MOM” into his hair, along with the number of years she has been cancer-free, and the shape of a ribbon to commemorate her survival and to support the cause of breast cancer awareness.

As a 9-year-old, Smith had promised to shave his head in solidarity with his mother when she was undergoing chemotherapy, but he was too nervous to go through with it. Since he reached high school and became fully aware of his mother’s courage during the physical and psychological suffering she endured, he has honored that promise.

“My mom is the greatest,” Smith says, because she shielded him and his two sisters from the physical ravages she was experiencing. They did not know the extent of her illness, much less her fatal prognosis.

Because the children’s parents were divorced, and the children spent every other week with their mother, she made certain they were not there when she was sick from the chemotherapy. They only saw her acting normally as she spent quality time with them and drove them from Redding, where she worked as an ICU nurse and was being treated, for 45 minutes to their K-8 school in Los Molinos and to extracurricular activities. “She was determined that our schooling was not to be interrupted,” he says.

That determination saw her safely through a rugged treatment regimen that still has her doctors baffled. She defied the odds and survived, Smith insists, because of her overarching faith in God.

Smith’s mother has resumed her duties as a cardiac rehab nurse, and she continues to inspire others. “During my senior year in high school, I presided over the football halftime homecoming festivities in Red Bluff where my dad lives. In honor of her, I dyed the ribbon pink, and we even wore pink bow ties,” he says. The community was very supportive of his commemorative haircut, and Smith also chaired Relay for Life fundraisers. “I would like to continue that relay tradition at Sac State,” he says.

His honors history professor, Candace Gregory-Abbott, marvels at Smith’s ongoing commitment to his mother’s struggle. As a breast cancer survivor herself, Gregory-Abbott can relate; she continued to teach throughout her treatment and has been open in class about surviving this ordeal. She urges students who are dealing with cancer in any situation to come and speak with her.
For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-6156. – Alan Miller