

Chris Velardi:

Welcome to the Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm Chris Velardi. Our guest, this episode is 2017 Syracuse University grad, Danielle Koppenaal. This spring at the age of 28, Danielle was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer.

Danielle Koppenaal:

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Chris Velardi:

So how does she do that? Try to keep her life as normal as possible. During our conversation, Danielle will share her approach to battling this cancer, leaning on her support system, trying to stay active and she'll talk about her commitment to raising awareness about cancer. Particularly the increase the medical community is seeing in what it calls early onset cancers in the United States. That's where we'll start. I mean a stage four cancer diagnosis and a 28 year old doesn't seem like it should be a common thing.

Danielle Koppenaal:

Well, it isn't however they are seeing, and when I say they, I guess doctors and people in the medical field, they are seeing that there is a huge rise in younger adults, specifically adults 20 to 30, that are actually getting colon cancer and advanced stages like myself. So I'm not sure if you're familiar or know of this, but they just recently lowered the colonoscopy age or requirement to 45. It was 50, now it's 45. And personally I think that's even too high, especially if you have anything genetically within your family or any underlying issue. Because for myself, I had an underlying issue and I would recommend going as much as you can for diagnostic testings and screenings. So yes, I mean I think in the last decade maybe it would be seen as uncommon, but it is getting more and more common, which is really unfortunate. And the reason why I've been trying to speak out more about this as much as I can.

Chris Velardi:

What was getting that news like for you?

Danielle Koppenaal:

I don't even... Honestly the craziest news I've ever gotten in my life, just earth shattering. And I was in full shock to be honest with you. I went from shock to all right, we got to deal with this, what do we need to do? I need to start now. Yeah.

Chris Velardi:

How quickly did that happen? And I know people respond to news like this in various ways and there's got to be a process of absorbing, processing and then developing some type of action plan. How did that work in your life?

Danielle Koppenaal:

It was very quickly. So I was at a hospital on the Upper East Side for about five days where they were really trying to figure out the primary. I originally was diagnosed or they originally thought it was ovarian

cancer, but then ruled that out. So we got to colon cancer via a biopsy with a colonoscopy. So I would say when I first heard the news, like I was saying, it was shocking and I didn't really know how to feel. But then we had a surgeon and a doctor speak to us about what chemotherapy and what this journey would look like for me.

And I think based off of that I knew, okay, I've got this, we've got to start now. And it was very quick. It was within probably an hour or two that that journey began. I had the diagnosis and then I'm not sure if you're familiar with or listeners are familiar with, but you typically get a port put in where you choose which side of your chest that you want and basically that's where the chemotherapy goes in every time for when you go in for a round. That port was putting me faster than you could think. So that was basically the start of it. And then less than a week after the diagnosis, I started my first round of chemotherapy. So it was very, very, very quick.

Chris Velardi:

Wow. But I would imagine with a stage four diagnosis, you have to act fast. I mean this isn't something that you can say, "Well, let me think about it. Let me figure out what I want to do."

Danielle Koppenaal:

Yeah, no, they recommended it. I start right away. And with that being only a 28 year old I'm not married, I don't have kids, I couldn't do... Also being stage four, I couldn't have the egg retrieval that you would hope for because with chemotherapy everything becomes toxic in your body from what I understand. So I didn't have time for that. So it was just a matter of we need to start treatment and we need to start it now. So yeah, exactly. Stage four, that's the stage where you got to start right away.

Chris Velardi:

And so this was May, we are now mid-August as we talk. How are you?

Danielle Koppenaal:

Well, I started off and then it got a little rough and then I think I'm hitting a little bit of a wall if I'm being honest, I just finished up round seven and I have a little bit more to go and yeah, I think I've just been going round after round. It's every other week that I go. So I'm trying to now just remind myself that it's day by day. I think I'm forgetting that. I think I'm thinking too far ahead and about how much more I need to do. So I think in a way I'm hitting a wall, but I'm really trying to now remind myself like I've still got this, everything will be okay. Just seeing things more as smaller milestones. So that's my approach recently.

Chris Velardi:

Obviously this is something that you can't be going through alone. What kind of support system do you have and how has that helped you work through obviously what is an incredibly difficult time?

Danielle Koppenaal:

So my family, I'm one of three and then my dad and my mom obviously. So they actually got an apartment one block from mine and they've been rotating in and out where they can help me and come to different appointments. So That's been super helpful. Unfortunately for me, I have to be at every appointment, but for them it's so necessary to circulate in and out and just get a minute to themselves and regroup. So that's been great. And then I also live with my boyfriend and he has been just

exceptional throughout this all, the best support I could imagine. So I'm very lucky in that sense. I've had really great people in my corner and around me.

Chris Velardi:

And this is the thing too that you have made a decision not to keep this battle to yourself. You have decided that maybe in your own personal diagnosis and now treatment there's a lesson that can be shared, a story that can be shared and be helpful for others. How quickly did you decide that that was a route you want to go in and how are you trying to share that story?

Danielle Koppenaar:

So I knew right away that I wanted to start or try to bring awareness to the fact that we're seeing such higher numbers in colon cancer cases. Yeah. Right away I wanted to do something I just don't think I had the energy or the brain bandwidth. So then around round four, round five is when I really did a 180 and I completely turned things around and that's when I started this podcast called Cancer Chats where I want to bring awareness to not only colon cancer but to any type of cancer that we're seeing in younger adults as well. So that's what I started to do and also I've been blogging and recording every time I work out. So That's just been really helpful. And I think also hearing from cancer survivors It's, very motivational. So that's what has kept me going and kept my hopes up and staying positive.

Chris Velardi:

We're talking obviously because you are a Syracuse alumna, tell me a little about your Syracuse story. What did you study at Syracuse and what drew you to Syracuse in the first place?

Danielle Koppenaar:

Yeah. So I visited Syracuse and I loved it right away. I loved the atmosphere and the campus was so beautiful. And then also the fact that I grew up not too far. I grew up in New Jersey, so I didn't want to go anywhere too far and it felt like the right place for me. And also the fact that the school spirit is so amazing and I felt that when I was there. So that's what I gravitated towards and I've always been growing up really into sports and everything like that. So I just loved it right away.

And in terms of what I studied, I was in the College of Arts and Sciences and I studied psychology, specifically very much like neuropsych towards the end of my degree. So I was very much into that. Then yeah, I just think that the comradery and the school spirit just really kept me there. I remember one of my first basketball games was Syracuse versus Duke and the feeling I had when we won that game, I was like, "Wow. This is the best school I could be at right now." And I just loved every minute of it.

Chris Velardi:

As you talk about this journey you're on now, and you talk about the comradery and the spirit, have you continued to feel that even though you're no longer a student, you're no longer here in Syracuse?

Danielle Koppenaar:

Yeah, definitely. I mean with having this podcast come out and all the support that I've gotten from fellow alum, it's just been so great. And what I've received in the mail and the nicest messages, everyone has been so supportive and so great to me. So absolutely, even from a distance. Obviously not being on campus anymore, I really do feel that. So It's been amazing to have people like this in my corner.

Chris Velardi:

As you continue on this journey, and obviously the goal is to get healthy and to beat this, I mean that's always the goal. But because of where you are, the stage you are in your life and this newfound side mission of helping to spread the word, how has that affected your outlook?

Danielle Koppenaal:

I think I obviously didn't see this for me, this is not something I could have-

Chris Velardi:

You could.

Danielle Koppenaal:

I couldn't have predicted this from a mile away, but I think having it be such a passion project at this point like I was saying it just really keeps me positive and I definitely foresee this being something hopefully for the rest of my life, helping people as much as possible through these tougher times. So I think that's just been really important to me and I'm finding that each day with the messages I get from different cancer survivors and their stories. I just want to keep continuing and doing this as much as I can. It's definitely a passion project for sure.

Chris Velardi:

Yeah, it's a very personal passion project without a doubt. I know You're early into this, but has there been any story in particular that you've heard that has just really rung true with you or inspired you or moved you in a way that you found powerful?

Danielle Koppenaal:

In terms of having a cancer survivor on the podcast?

Chris Velardi:

Yeah.

Danielle Koppenaal:

Yes. Well, we just had actually our first interviewee. We have a whole season one book, which is so amazing, but so our first one somehow beat a very advanced diagnosis within six months and hearing that I was just like wow, anything is really possible. And I think having that right mindset and having no other thought process in your head negativity wise, you can really do anything and you're capable of anything. And being so young, our bodies are so tough that there's just... Yeah, like I was saying, it keeps me going and helps me stay positive.

Chris Velardi:

I mean, obviously hearing stories of success and knowing that things are possible, but the idea of the mental aspect of it, how do you keep that mindset in the process of all of this? I think you hear about it all the time. You hear about the importance of being positive and having that mentally tough, but also positive approach. How do you work to keep that?

Danielle Koppenaal:

It's tough. I'm not going to sugarcoat it. I think it comes in waves. I think I try to keep it 90% positive, but I would say keeping your life as normal as possible, I know everyone says that when you get a diagnosis like this, but it's true. You can't let it overtake you and just consume you because if you do, I think you get too much in your head and you can't control the narrative at points, I could imagine. So I think just for me at least also working out, clearing my head in that way, going for walks, going for a run, doing something always has helped me pre diagnosis. So that has helped me a tremendous amount. And then just trying to keep a routine, staying as normal as possible.

Chris Velardi:

Something you said that I think the authenticity of it is really powerful and that is look, it's not all the time. You can't be positive all the time and accepting that has to be a really important part of the process too, is to wake up in the morning and say, "Okay. You know what? Today may not be a great day. Today may be a bad day. I may not be in the right head space or whatever it is." But then allowing yourself to know, but that's just one day, it's just one thing.

Danielle Koppenaal:

That's the thing. I've been trying to tell myself that, like I mentioned many milestones, getting through the day as best I can is a win, and this isn't forever, I will beat this. So just reminding myself that. Being gentle with myself, if I need to lay in bed and rest, I need to. My body's fighting something major and I can't be hard on myself because of that. So I really try to remind myself as much as I can. And then also with my support system, I feel like everyone also tries to remind me of that as well.

Chris Velardi:

There are life lessons in that for people who aren't battling big things, that there are days where you have to allow yourself that grace to say, "Okay. You know what, today's a day that I just need to be," and that has to be enough.

Danielle Koppenaal:

Yeah, definitely. And I think, yeah, like you said, even before this I would be hard on myself if I didn't complete at least one task or do something that I see as meaningful. So I think even after this I'll hopefully remember that and know that your body needs rest at points and yeah.

Chris Velardi:

Yeah, no, everyone does. And particularly when you're in the midst of a really difficult challenging battle. If people are hearing your story, what is the most important thing you want them to take away?

Danielle Koppenaal:

I guess right now the most important thing that I see is for me, I know that you're typically scared of the what ifs when you're going to the doctor's appointments. But I really want people to feel empowered to go to their annual doctor's visits and not miss them and stay on top of that. You may be scared, you may think you have something, but you could get ahead of something and or prevent it entirely. So I think that's really my main goal right now is trying to give as much knowledge and education as I can towards just general health and wellness. So I think that's my main goal is just making sure... You're in your

twenties, you think, "I don't have anything. I can miss this annual doctor's visit, I'm fine." And God forbid, you can have a very scary diagnosis. So that's really my main mission with this right now.

Chris Velardi:

Yeah. Is that mentality when you're at a certain age or maybe before you reach a certain age where you feel like, "You know what? I'll deal with that when I'm 45, when I'm 50. It's, not something I have to think about." Whether it's a colonoscopy, a mammogram, whatever it may be.

Danielle Koppenaal:

And we interviewed someone like I was saying, who had a nagging cough. It was winter time, he thought nothing of it. Turns out it was something more than he thought. So just things like that where it's like we aren't invincible even though we're 20 something years old. You may be scared but go and see your doctor, get the right testings done and get ahead of whatever you can. That's just it's so important.

Chris Velardi:

Yeah. It's important. And to hear from people who are living examples of why it's important, it's crucial. Where can we find you? Where can we find your new podcast? And you mentioned you're doing some blogging as well, where can people continue to follow your journey?

Danielle Koppenaal:

Yes. So right now I have an Instagram account with my co-host, Bevin O'Brien. We're friends from home, and the Cancer Chats handle it's @cancer_chats, and then our podcast can be found on both Spotify and Apple Podcasts under just Cancer Chats. Then I also, like you mentioned, have a blog where it's at cancer-chats.com. That way you can find me. I've been recording all of the runs that I go on and how I'm feeling and things like that. So those are the few ways you can find us.

Chris Velardi:

You mentioned that you are finding inspiration in talking to survivors, talking to people who are finding those ways to live normal, as you say, and I'm sure others can find the same inspiration in hearing your story and seeing how you're pushing through and battling and trying to live as normal as possible.

Danielle Koppenaal:

Yeah, I hope so. That's another thing too is having this podcast and showing that even though I'm having hard times, you can get through something like this with grace and with the right support system and everything around you. So that was really the goal of this podcast too, is yes cancer is a very scary topic, but let's talk about it. And I've already mentioned this, I am young and my body's tough. If you are going through something like this and you can listen to my experience, hopefully that can bring you positivity and hope as well.

Chris Velardi:

I encourage you to do just that. Follow Danielle's journey through her Cancer Chats podcast and Instagram account. Be inspired by her story, show her your support. There are links in this episode's description. My thanks again to Danielle Koppenaal for sharing her story with us. As I mentioned during our conversation, there are takeaways for all of us in her efforts to maintain a positive mindset and celebrate those smaller milestones in life. You don't have to be going through some major battle to

benefit from those things. I'm Chris Velardi. Thanks for listening to the Cuse Conversations Podcast.
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