

New Mexico Activities Association Student Spotlight

St. Michael's Capener Dances Through her Fight with Cancer

By Arnie Leshin

Cancer is a group of diseases in which some body cells change their nature, start to divide uncontrollably and may revert to an undifferentiated type.

To Keanna Capener, it was a cough, just a cough, probably only a cold. But, when it got worse, was persistent and didn't go away, it was time to check it out because there were warning signs.

Capener is now a junior at St. Michael's in Santa Fe. She grew up dancing, as early as two years old. That was her first love when it came to activities and, as the years passed, she had the dream of many other girls to perform with the Pony Express, the school's dance team coached for years by Lydia Sanchez.

She made it and made it in such a big way that she is now in her fourth year with the Pony Express varsity in her junior year, which is not an easy feat to accomplish through the team's tryout process. Her dream of being on the team was realized and she was named captain as a junior.

But there are setbacks in life. For the talented Capener, the setback came in the form of cancer when she was diagnosed with stage II Hodgkin Lymphoma causing a nagging cough and sometimes hoarseness.

Doctors in Santa Fe familiar with this informed Gina and Glenn, Keanna's parents, that they needed to quickly get their daughter to the University of New Mexico Children's Hospital.

"She had chest x-rays there and a biopsy," said her mom, "and that began chemo (chemotherapy) - something we never would have expected when the coughing began."

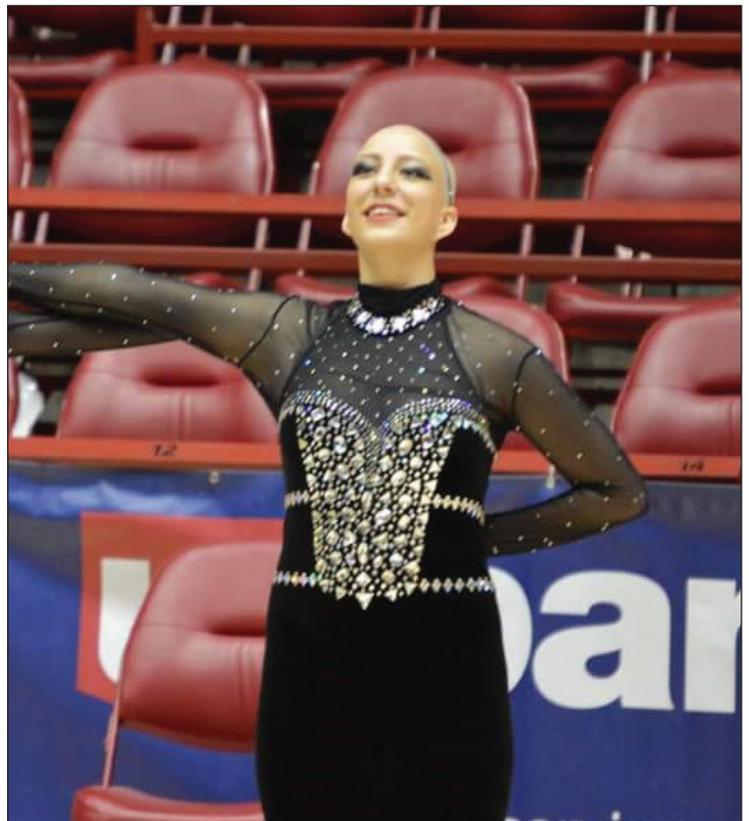
The course of events was totally unexpected to Keanna, who said she didn't know how much longer she could keep coughing like that.

"I've had coughs in the past," she said, "and I had just gotten over a cold when this particular cough began. Some time after, I went to practice ready to dance and Coach Sanchez sent me home, said the cough didn't sound good at all."

"I wasn't happy about it, but once we learned there was a problem, it was a rush to the hospital in Albuquerque and a relief now to know we caught it in time. Now I'm an outpatient, feeling pretty good, and close to the end of chemo, with radiation coming next."

She added that the doctors and nurses at the hospital have been just wonderful - plus no more coughing - and she and her family were relieved that the rush to Albuquerque was absolutely important.

This was late in January. On February 17, she left the hospital with the Pony Express no doubt in her thoughts, but with



the knowledge that the treatment had to work for her to get back with the group. She had already missed making the trip to Orlando, Fla., for the national championships.

Could she be dancing again? If so, when? The good news came on March 22nd, her final scheduled appointment, when the doctors cleared her to dance, feeling comfortable that she was ready.

Back at the practices, Keanna was super excited and at the annual state championships on April 1 at the UNM Pit, she danced with the Pony Express, which probably encouraged the group into winning a 25th state championship, best of all schools.

The only thing different this time was the happy return of Keanna. She was so glad to be out there, she didn't care about covering her head after the chemo left her without any hair. No doubt her parents, family and friends couldn't hold back the happy tears that day. There were those in the audience with enthusiastic posters regarding Keanna, and that also meant a lot.

To her mom, it was awesome.

"Thank heavens," her mom said, "that the chemo is working and that Keanna is very receptive to it. Seventy five percent of the mass (tumor) is gone."

To the Capeners, dancing the night away is a family thing. They have three other daughters, all of whom have performed with the Pony Express, with Kayla graduating in 2009, Katelynne in 2013, and Kathryn now a freshman and of course a member of the Pony Express.

Like Keanna, they all began dancing at an early age. They all did ballet, Spanish dancing with the Baile Espanol, performed with the National Dance Institute in Santa Fe, and were part of the Swat and Celebration Team while in junior high and high school. Plus, all four were cheerleaders back in elementary and middle school.

Keanna also played some soccer and volleyball in elementary and middle school, but as a Lady Horsemen, nothing mattered more than dancing with the Pony Express under Sanchez, who is now in her 29th year as head coach. To Keanna, dancing was too demanding to spend her time in other sports.

"Like her sisters," her mom said, "she just loved to dance. She's done ballet, tap and jazz."

Kayla, too, did the same. But at UNM, it was all about academics. That is what she focused on, and she received her degree in 2013 when Keanna was a freshman at St. Michael's. Katelynne is now a sophomore at UNM. She's also concentrating on the classrooms, but has found time to take ballet and flamenco classes.

Their mom and dad met in Albuquerque. Both committed to supporting their talented daughters, with dad often carrying out their costumes at Spanish dancing.

"Glenn is a quiet supporter," Gina said, "and I just yell and scream."

Coach Sanchez was concerned when Keanna was coming to practice and couldn't stop coughing.

"I literally had to send her home," Sanchez said, "because of that coughing. She thought it was just a cold, but to me, it was more than that."

"She's a strong little girl," said Sanchez, "she doesn't give up. She was with us in junior high, on the JV in 7th grade, and on the varsity in 8th."

"When she became ill, we had to cancel one of our performances, and not only was she upset when I sent her home, she was also mad that a performance was canceled because of her."

"And after she was rushed to the hospital she sent a text to the team, told them she was going to miss the next performance, but that the show must go on."

Be well, dance on, Keanna.