

"I AM the Bald Ballerina"

As told to Rachel Zar

A young dancer's journey back to the barre after cancer

At the beginning of 2014, Maggie Kudirka was living her dream. The lifelong dancer had just made it into NYC's Joffrey Ballet Concert Group, a student company that she hoped would pave the way to a professional ballet career. But by summer, everything had changed: Maggie, just 23, discovered a lump in her left breast and was diagnosed with breast cancer. After recovering from the shock, she dubbed herself the "Bald Ballerina" and took to social media to share her story with family and friends—and to raise money for her ever-growing medical bills. Here, she shares her story in her own words.

When my doctor told me the diagnosis was breast cancer, I thought maybe I hadn't heard him clearly. My whole world turned upside-down. Would I survive? Would I dance again? I didn't know to respond—I just cried uncontrollably.

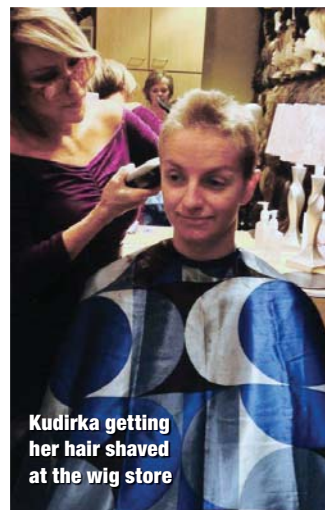
My oncologist told me I had an aggressive tumor that would grow quickly, so I needed to act fast. I'd go through chemotherapy and then surgery, and I might need radiation or hormonal therapy. It was a lot to process. But hearing my doctors say they'd do everything they could to get me back to normal—and dancing again—made me feel a lot better.

The severity of what was happening didn't truly hit me until I started treatment. I had to put my career on hold

and move home to Maryland to begin chemotherapy. Starting in July, I had six treatments—one every three weeks. Each session took all day, and I was hooked up to an IV that gave me five drugs.

During this time, I'd try to make it to ballet class two or three times a week. I'd barely make it through barre before needing to stop from exhaustion, but dancing helped keep me positive.

Besides fatigue, chemotherapy can have a lot of side effects, like nausea and vomiting—and hair loss. At the beginning of treatment, clumps of my long hair started to fall out in the shower and on my pillow, so I decided to cut it short. I went to a wig store run by two breast



Kudirka getting her hair shaved at the wig store

(FROM TOP) LUIS PONS PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY MAGGIE KUDIRKA; COURTESY KUDIRKA

DANCER TO DANCER off the record

cancer survivors, who gave me the idea to make a halo—a half-wig out of my own hair. But once they started to cut, they suggested shaving it all; it was falling out fast. I took a deep breath and said, “Go for it.”

As it turned out, there were some great perks to being bald: It was a hot summer and my shaved head felt nice and cool. Plus, I didn’t have to worry about frizz from the humidity. My friends and family helped me feel confident—they said I had a great-shaped head. Some people even suggested I stay bald post-chemo. (Sorry, folks, I’m not doing that—I miss my hair too much!)

Besides the physical side effects, it was also expensive. One of my chemo drugs, for instance, cost \$9,000 per treatment. After speaking with my family, I decided to create a fundraising page on youcaring.com. Almost immediately, extended family, friends and complete strangers reached out to help the “Bald Ballerina.” Even Robert Battle, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, wrote me a really kind message and donated to my page.

Mr. Battle wasn’t alone: I’ve felt support from the entire dance community. In October, I put on a fundraising concert, and Adrienne Canterna, whom I’ve always looked up to, offered to perform. Many other dancers who’ve had cancer have also reached out to me to say I’ve given them strength. Everyone’s comments and prayers have really helped keep me



“Dancing helped keep me positive,” Kudirka says.

upbeat. I’m also hugely appreciative of everyone’s generosity: I raised enough money for my first year of treatment.

In November, I received some amazing news: The chemotherapy was very effective. A scan showed that my breasts and lymph nodes were cancer-free, and there was only a little bit left in my bones.

The next step was surgery. I had a double mastectomy the day after Christmas, which meant the tissue from both of my breasts was removed. I tried to see this as a positive instead of a loss: It will greatly decrease the chance of a recurrence. (Plus, I’ll be able to fit into costumes better!)

Thankfully, the surgery went smoothly and I was allowed to return to the studio the following week—as long as I didn’t lift anything over 10 pounds. I expected to feel stiff since I hadn’t danced in a few weeks, but I was surprised to have trouble with balancing and turning. Removing my breasts changed my center of gravity!

Even though surgery is over, my fundraising page is still active. I’ll have to be on maintenance drugs the rest of my life. Meanwhile, my hair is growing back and my energy level is increasing. I still have to take naps some days, and other days I’m too tired to go to class, but I’m slowly getting back to normal.

I still hope to join a professional ballet company. My other dream is to turn Bald Ballerina into a nonprofit, which will give grants to dancers with cancer. I’d also like to spread awareness about cancer and research and to keep sharing my experiences with others. Throughout this journey, I’ve learned to stay positive—negative thoughts make it harder to heal. And I’ve learned to keep the people who love and support me as close as possible. I couldn’t imagine getting through this without them. **DS**



Adrienne Canterna (left) signing pointe shoes at Kudirka’s fundraising concert



In November, Kudirka (left) spoke at Starbound’s Dancers Care Foundation benefit competition.

(FROM TOP) LUIS RONS PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY MAGGIE KUDIRKA; (2) COURTESY KUDIRKA