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**Magen
Cherry**

**Health and
Grace**



Health and Gra

Former Miss Texas finds a career and family after battling ulcerative colitis

By Ed Pfueller,
UOAA Communications & Outreach Manager

Silver confetti fell from above the stage, shimmering against Magen (Ellis) Cherry's black and gold sequined dress as she crouched to receive the Miss Texas 2007 Crown. The crown's Texas stars sparkled and she smiled broadly for the cameras. This would get her one step closer to her longtime dream of becoming Miss USA.

Cherry did not let the onset of a mystery illness of mouth ulcers and abdominal distress at the start of the 10-day production deter her. Two days after the win, she had a colonoscopy and was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis.

It was now clear that she had not just "eaten something bad," as some suggested. "I was barely in rehearsals. I took Imodium and sucked it up. I don't know how I did that looking back, because now if I get an upset stomach I'm in bed," Cherry says.

Keep It A Secret

Her first doctor gave her some medication and sent her on her way with very little information. Another physician was confident she could go into remission if she took the needed steroids, but as Miss Texas, Cherry was reluctant to take them. "I think we've changed as a society, but back then in the pageant world, it was don't let anyone know you are sick. Don't let anyone know you have any sort of weakness because if you want to be Miss USA they are not going to want anyone who is out sick all the time," Cherry says.

As Miss Texas, she'd often speak with kids at children's hospitals while she was still struggling with illness herself. When it came time to go to Los Angeles for the Miss USA Pageant, Cherry was doing medicated enemas every night. She kept the extent of her illness to herself and thoughts of wearing a white swimsuit in competition was a cause of particular worry. Cherry forged ahead, finishing in the top 10 of the nationally televised pageant.

In 2008 Cherry was modeling and continuing

college studies, but her condition only got worse. She started having urgent and random accidents. "It usually happened in my car, I just could not get to the bathroom fast enough, which is humiliating," she says. Her boyfriend (now husband) Brad Cherry and her parents grew increasingly concerned. "I remember one time we were leaving a wedding on this bumpy dirt road and I was like I gotta go, and he had no time to turn around."

Later that night her family pleaded with her that something had to change and that she deserved a better quality of life. "I was in denial of how bad it really was."

By spring 2009 Cherry was in and out of the hospital, caught in a vicious cycle. On one visit, a doctor on shift asked, "Have you had enough yet, do you want to get your life back?"

"Yeah. What am I missing?" Cherry replied.

"You need to have surgery. You will get your quality of life back. It is not a cure per se, but you will be free from all of this. This is no way to live, you are 22 years old," the doctor said. Cherry's parents happened to be in the room and thought she should consider it. "For me, it felt like I was giving up, like I was letting the disease win," Cherry reflected.

Even after she decided to move forward with the ileoanal (j-pouch) surgery she was told she first needed to gain weight. "People looked at me like I had an eating disorder, it was awful. I love food," Cherry said.

Positive Mindset

A nurse connected her with another patient who had been through the surgery, but the woman was negative, depressing, and had nothing comforting to say at all. "I remember after she left my room thinking, okay I'm going to have a positive mindset about this even if it is not easy."

After finally being cleared for surgery Cherry awoke with a red swollen stoma and named it Sebastian. "I don't know why, it just seemed like a good name to yell. I still laugh anytime I hear that name." Like many, she had challenges managing the ileostomy but once

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she got into a rhythm with it discovered it was not as daunting as it seemed. “I had a great ostomy nurse. She was really super helpful in giving the tricks of the trade to help me get used to it.”

Though she put modeling on hold, Cherry did not let the ostomy keep her from public appearances. “I remember going back to Miss Texas that September. I put on a sparkly dress, got hair and make-up done and just went and owned it. It was great once I figured out what I could wear,” Cherry recalls. “It does not matter if I have an ileostomy right now, people are just happy that I am healthy.”

J-Pouch Surgery

Thankful to feel better she looked forward to the ostomy reversal and completion of the j-pouch surgery. “One of my regrets is I did not keep my ileostomy a few months longer because I don’t think my body had enough time to heal from the inflammation.” She has had to contend with some bouts of pouchitis and some remaining IBD symptoms of the pouch, but all-in-all, surgery gave her life back.

Cherry graduated with honors in broadcast journalism from the University of Houston in 2010. However, her eight-week hospital stay left her with a new perspective on possible careers and a renewed desire to help others. She took a public relations position at Shriners Hospital in Galveston, which is known for its pediatric burn unit. She also started working with the local chapter of the Crohn’s & Colitis Foundation. “I just wanted to use my voice and experiences to be a positive influence on others.” As she went public with her experience, people reached out to connect. “It’s a small world... it really starts a conversation.”

Cherry’s husband Brad has type 1 diabetes and while attending a training for his insulin pump, it sparked an interest in her to pursue a career path in diabetes medical sales. During a company presentation for an insulin patch, she was taught that the adhesive was hypoallergenic and similar to those used for ostomy pouches. “Yeah, okay, I know about that,” she thought.

Starting a Family

When the couple started planning to start a family, she was aware that fertility may be affected by her health history and the j-pouch meant a C-section would be required. To their surprise, the couple conceived quickly and had a son in 2013. Their attempts to have a second child in the years that followed however were not successful. Then, after trying a variety of treatments and moving on, the couple were surprised to find out they were expecting in November of 2020. “It was so exciting but scary to be pregnant during a pandemic,” Cherry says. Also, a second C-section can be more difficult than the first.

Working in healthcare and as a patient herself, Cherry encourages others to self-advocate whenever possible. “What a difference it can make in your care because you know your body best, the more information you can give your doctor the better,” she says.

Cherry suggests you give yourself some grace and only focus on things you can control. She emphasizes, “Surgery is not giving up.”

“I realized at a very young age that your health is everything. If you don’t have your health, you don’t have anything. It does not matter if you are on top of the world because you just won Miss Texas. If you’re not healthy and you don’t feel well, it can really hold you back.” 🌸